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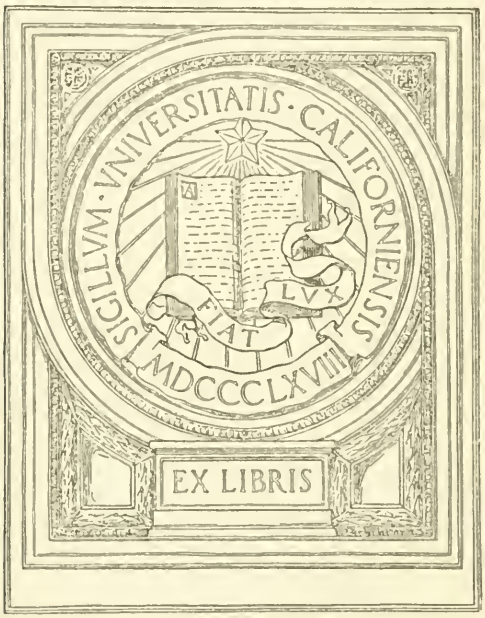

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IAN HAY

VOLUME V

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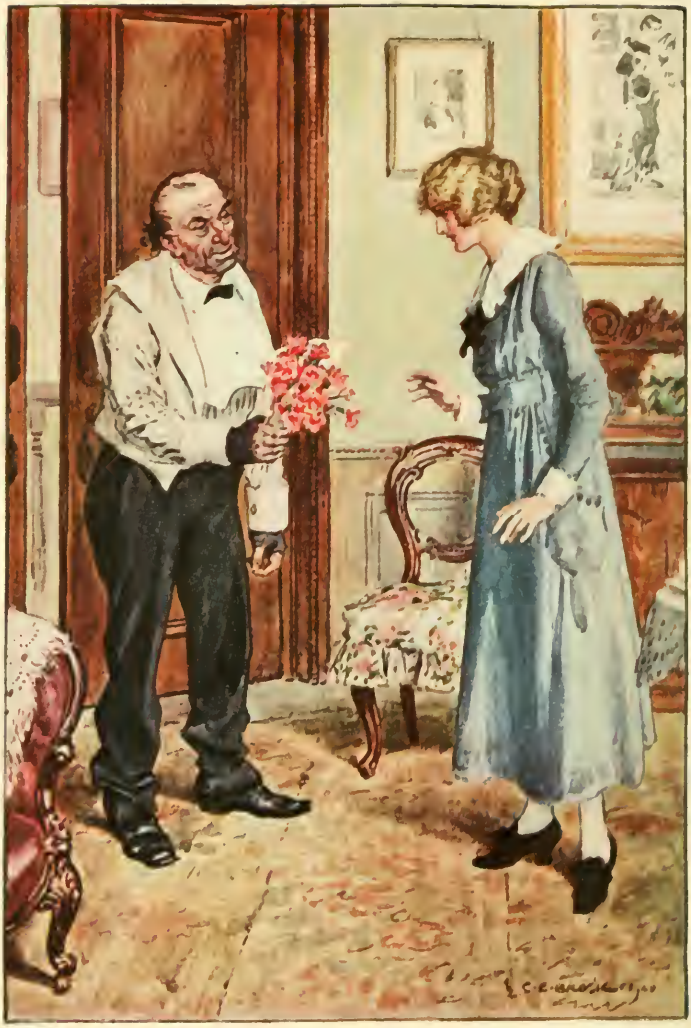

"THESE 'AVE JUST BEEN 'ANDED IN, MISS," HE ANNOUNCED. "NO NAME, AND"—WITH A SLIGHT NOTE OF CONGRATULATION IN HIS VOICE—"NOTHING TO PAY" (*Page* 281)

HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

BY

IAN HAY

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1921

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Published August, 1913

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CONTENTS

BOOK ONE

YOUTHFUL EXCURSIONS

I. A Brief Introduction 3
II. The First Freak 14
III. Io Saturnalia! 30

BOOK TWO

A BLIND ALLEY

IV. Travels with a First Reserve 69
V. Very Odious 78
VI. Forbidden Fruit — A Digression 88
VII. Unearned Increment 94
VIII. A Relapse 107
IX. The Only Way Out 126
X. Still at Large 134
XI. The First Turning to the Right 145

429910

BOOK THREE

THE RIGHT ROAD

XII. Mice and Men 151

XIII. Lucidity Itself 170

XIV. Another Cosy Chat, with an Interruption . 194

XV. A Day of Calm Reflection 208

XVI. An Impossible Family 229

XVII. The Word "Swank" 244

XVIII. De L'Audace, et encore de l'Audace, et toujours de l'Audace 257

XIX. Sidelights on a Public Character 263

XX. Rehearsed Effects 277

XXI. Unrehearsed 289

XXII. The Real Tilly 310

XXIII. The Real Mr. Welwyn 321

XXIV. A Garden Plot in Russell Square 334

XXV. Purely Commercial 346

XXVI. The Final Freak 360

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

At the end of 1911 a thing happened which such of my friends as were endowed with the not uncommon gift of wisdom after the event informed me was bound to have happened sooner or later. I overworked myself. I had found the pursuit of letters and the instruction of youth a very congenial combination, though undoubtedly hard work; but more and more I began to feel the need of a prolonged holiday. While I was trying to make up my mind to take one, Influenza stepped in, and gave it to me.

By the summer of 1912 I had forever turned my back, not without a genuine pang, upon my old and honoured profession, and settled down as an undiluted novelist — faced with the necessity of producing a new novel as speedily as possible. Even novelists must eat.

By way of a short cut, I exhumed the manuscript of a three-act play which I had written a year previously — just to see if I could write a play. The play was called "An Impossible Family" — a title which the theatrical managers of London evidently regarded as so appropriate that they rejected the manuscript with one ac-

cord. Taking the play as a foundation, I wrote a novel on the same theme around the adventures, chiefly sentimental, of one Dick Mainwaring, otherwise called "The Freak." It was not too exhilarating a task, for I was far from well at the time; but in due course the novel was completed, and was published in the summer of 1912, by William Blackwood & Sons and Houghton Mifflin Company respectively.

In due course various observant persons discovered in the novel the possibilities of a play, and wrote to say so. Some even offered to adapt it for me; others adapted it without offering, and it was found necessary to obtain legal protection. Ultimately my own version of the play was produced in London, and is running there at the time of writing, under the title of "Tilly of Bloomsbury." "Tilly" also threatens to invade America.

IAN HAY

HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

BOOK ONE

YOUTHFUL EXCURSIONS

HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

THEY — that is, the London-and-the-south-thereof contingent of the Hivite House at Grandwich — always celebrated the first morning of the holidays by breakfasting together at the Imperial Hotel at Oakleigh, as a preliminary to catching the nine-fifty-two.

A certain stateliness — not to say pomp — distinguished the function. Negotiations for the provision of the feast were opened at an early date — usually about half-term — the first step taking the form of a dignified but ungrammatical communication, cast in that most intricate and treacherous of moulds, the third person, to the proprietor of the hotel, intimating, after compliments, that *Mr. Rumbold (major), Hivite House, Grandwich School, would be much obliged if our party could be supplied with breakfast, and you usually do it for half-a-crown as there are a lot of us, and if you don't we shall probably go to the George, and as the party wishes to catch the train*

Mr. Rumbold would be obliged if you can give it to me punctually.

To this mine host would reply with a most gratifying typewritten document addressed to — *Rumbold, Esq.*, — a form of address which never fails to please so long as your parents and other adult correspondents persist in designating you "Master," — expressing the utmost willingness to provide breakfast for Mr. Rumbold's party at two-and-sixpence per head (which, by the way, was the normal charge), and concluding with a tactfully-worded request for information (inadvertently omitted from Mr. Rumbold's original communication) upon the following points: —

(1) The date of the feast.
(2) The number of young gentlemen likely to be present.
(3) The hour of the train which they propose to catch.

During the second half-term Mr. Rumbold's leisure would be pleasantly occupied in recruiting the breakfast-party and communicating its numbers and requirements, intermittently and piecemeal, together with searching enquiries *re* kidneys and ultimatums on the subject of scrambled eggs, to the rapidly ageing proprietor of the Imperial Hotel.

On the joyous morning of departure a dozen emancipated Helots, all glorious in bowler hats and coloured ties which atoned at a bound for thirteen weeks of statutory headgear and *subfusc.* haberdashery, descended upon the Imperial Hotel and sat down with intense but businesslike cheerfulness to the half-crown breakfast. On these occasions distinctions of caste were disregarded. Fag and prefect sat side by side. Brothers who had religiously cut one another throughout the term were reunited, even indulging in Christian names. Gentlemen who had fought to a finish behind the fives-court every alternate Wednesday afternoon since term began, took sweet counsel together upon the respective merits of Egyptian and Turkish cigarettes.

On the particular occasion with which we are concerned — a crisp morning in December — the party numbered twelve. It is not necessary to describe them in detail, for ten of them make their appearance, in this narrative, at any rate, for the first and last time. Let it suffice to say that Mr. Rumbold major sat at the head of the table and Mr. Rumbold minor at the foot, Mr. Rumbold tertius occupying a position about halfway down. Among others present might have been noticed (as the little society papers say) Mr. "Balmy" Coke, Mr. "Oaf" Sandiford, Mr. "Buggy" Reid, Mr. "Slimy" Green, Mr.

"Lummy" Law, and Mr. "Adenoid" Smith. More notable figures were Messrs. "Spangle" Jerningham and "Tiny" Carmyle — lesser luminaries than Rumbold himself, but shining lights in the athletic firmament for all that.

One place only was vacant. The company, in accordance with what is probably the most rigorous social code in existence — schoolboy etiquette — had divided itself into two groups. The first, consisting of those whose right to a place at the head of the table was unquestioned, settled down at once with loud and confident anticipations of enjoyment. The remainder followed their example with more diffidence, beginning at the foot of the table and extending coyly upwards, those whose claim to a place above the salt was beginning to be more than considerable punctiliously taking the lowest places in order to escape the dread stigma of "side." Thus, by reason of the forces of mutual repulsion, a gap occurred in the very middle of the table, between a nervous little boy in spectacles, one Buggy Reid, and the magnificent Mr. Jerningham, Secretary of the Fifteen and the best racquets-player in the school.

"One short!" announced Rumbold. "Who is it?"

There was a general counting of heads. Mr. Reid timidly offered information.

"I think it is The Freak," he said.

There was a general laugh.

"Wonder what he's up to now," mused Mr. Jerningham. "You ought to know, Rummy. Your fag, is n't he?"

"I gave him the bag two terms ago," replied the great man contentedly. "Tiny has him now."

He turned to another of the seniors — a long-legged youth with a subdued manner.

"Still got him, Tiny?"

"Yes," said Mr. Carmyle gloomily, "I have still got him. It's a hard life, though."

"I know," said Rumbold sympathetically. "Does he cross-question you about the photographs on your mantelpiece?"

"Yes," said Carmyle. "He spoke very favourably of my youngest sister. Showed me a photograph of his own, and asked me to come and stay with them in the holidays. Said he thought I would have much in common with his father."

There was general merriment at this, for Mr. Carmyle was patriarchal, both in appearance and habits. But it did nothing to soothe the nerves of The Freak himself, who happened at the moment to be standing shyly upon one leg outside the door, endeavouring to summon up sufficient courage to walk in.

He was a small sandy-haired boy with shrewd blue eyes and a most disarming smile, and he

belonged to a not uncommon and distinctly unlucky class. There are boys who are shy and who look shy. Such are usually left to themselves, and gradually attain to confidence. There are boys who are bumptious and behave bumptiously. Such are usually put through a brief disciplinary course by their friends, and ultimately achieve respectability. And there are boys who are shy, but who, through sheer self-consciousness and a desire to conceal their shyness, behave bumptiously. The way of such is hard. Public School disciplinary methods do not discriminate between the sheep and the goats. Variations from the normal, whether voluntary or involuntary, are all corrected by the same methods. Unconventionality of every kind is rebuked by stern moralists who have been through the mill themselves, and are convinced that it would be ungenerous to deprive the succeeding generation of the benefits which have produced such brilliant results in their own case.

The Freak — Master Richard Mainwaring — entered the school-world unfairly handicapped. He had never been from home before. He was an only son, and had had few companions but his parents. Consequently he was addicted to language and phraseology which, though meet and fitting upon the lips of elderly gentlemen, sounded ineffably pedantic upon those of an

unkempt fag of fourteen. Finally, he was shy and sensitive, yet quite unable to indicate that characteristic by a retiring demeanour.

Life at school, then, did not begin too easily for him. He was naturally of a chirpy and confiding disposition, and the more nervous he felt the more chirpy and confiding he became. He had no instincts, either, upon the subject of caste. Instead of confining himself to his own impossible order of pariahs, he attempted to fraternise with any boy who interested him. He addressed great personages by their pet names; he invited high potentates to come and partake of refreshment at his expense. Now, promiscuous *bonhomie* in new boys is not usually encouraged in the great schools of England, and all the ponderous and relentless machinery available for the purpose was set in motion to impress this truth upon the over-demonstrative Freak. Most of us know this mighty engine. Under its operations many sensitive little boys crumple up into furtive and apathetic nonentities. Others grow into licensed buffoons, battening upon their own shame, cadging for cheap applause, thinking always of things to say and to do which will make fellows laugh. The Freak did neither. He remained obstinately and resolutely a Freak. If chidden for eccentricity he answered back, sometimes too effectively, and

suffered. But he never gave in. At last, finding that he apparently feared no one, — though really this was far from being the case: his most audacious flights were as often as not inspired by sheer nervous excitement, — the world in which he moved decided to tolerate him, and finally ended by extending towards him a sort of amused respect.

All this time we have left our friend standing outside the door. Presently, drawing a deep breath, he entered, jauntily enough.

"Hallo, Freak, where have you been?" enquired Mr. Rumbold.

"I felt constrained," replied The Freak, as one old gentleman to another, "to return to the House upon an errand of reparation."

A full half of the company present were blankly ignorant as to the meaning of the word "reparation," so they giggled contentedly and decided that The Freak was in good form this morning.

"What was the trouble?" asked Jerningham.

"As I was counting my change in the cab," explained The Freak, "I found that I was a penny short. (I'll have fried sole, and then bacon-and-eggs, please. And chocolate.)"

"Shylock!" commented the humorous Mr. Jerningham.

The Freak hastened to explain.

"It was the only penny I had," he said: "that

was why I missed it. The rest was silver. I saw what had happened: I had given a penny to Seagrave by mistake, instead of half-a-crown."

The thought of Mr. Seagrave, the stern and awful butler of the Hivite House, incredulously contemplating a solitary copper in his palm, what time the unconscious Freak drove away two-and-fivepence to the good, tickled the company greatly, and the narrator had made considerable inroads upon the fried sole before he was called upon to continue.

"What did you do?" asked Rumbold.

"I drove back and apologised, and gave him two-and-fivepence," said The Freak simply.

"Was he shirty about it?"

"No; he did n't seem at all surprised," was the rather naïve reply.

There was another laugh at this, and Jerningham observed: —

"Freak, you are the limit."

"I may be the limit," countered The Freak hotly, — ordinary chaff he could endure, but Mr. Jerningham had more than once exceeded the bounds of recognised fag-baiting that term, — "but I *am* wearing my own shirt, Jerningham, and not one of Carmyle's!"

There was a roar at this unexpected riposte, for Jerningham, though a dandy of the most ambitious type, was notoriously addicted to

borrowed plumage, and the cubicle of the easy-going Carmyle was next his own.

"You will be booted for that afterwards, my lad," announced the discomfited wearer of Mr. Carmyle's shirt.

The Freak surveyed his tormentor thoughtfully. After all, he was safe from reprisals for nearly five weeks. He therefore replied, deliberately and pedantically: —

"I do not dispute the probability of the occurrence. But that won't prevent you," he added, reverting to the vernacular, "from feeling jolly well scored off, all the same. And" — after a brief interval to allow this psychological point full play — "mind you send the shirt back to Carmyle. I have enough trouble looking after his things as it is. Get it washed, and then carefully dis—"

"Carefully *what?*" enquired Mr. Jerningham, beginning to push back his chair.

The Freak, who had intended to say "disinfected," decided not to endanger his clean collar, carefully brushed hair, and other appurtenances of the homeward-bound.

— "And carefully despatched per Parcels Post," he concluded sweetly. "Hello, you fellows — finished?"

"Yes: buck up!" commanded Rumbold.

The feast ended in traditional fashion. No

bill was ever asked for or presented upon these occasions. Rumbold major merely took the sugar-basin and, having emptied it of its contents, placed therein the sum of two-and-ninepence — half-a-crown for his breakfast and threepence for the waiters. The bowl was then sent round the table in the manner of an offertory plate, and the resulting collection was handed without ceremony to the fat head-waiter, who received it with a stately bow and a few well-chosen and long-familiar phrases upon the subject of a good holiday and a Merry Christmas; after which the members of the party dispersed to the railway station and went their several ways.

It was characteristic of The Freak that he hung behind at the last moment, for the purpose of handing a furtive shilling to the inarticulate Teuton who had assisted in dispensing breakfast, and whose underfed appearance had roused beneath the comfortably distended waistcoat of our altruistic friend certain suspicions, not altogether unfounded, as to the principle upon which head-waiters share tips with their subordinates.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST FREAK

My name is Carmyle. Possibly you may have noticed it in the previous chapter, among the list of those present at the breakfast at the Imperial. It was not a particularly hilarious meal for me, for I was leaving Grandwich for good that morning; and the schoolboy bids farewell to this, the first chapter of his life, with a ceremony — not to say solemnity — sadly at variance with the cheerfulness or indifference with which he sometimes turns the page at the close of later epochs.

I parted from the main body of Hivites at Peterborough, for they were bound for London, while I had to transfer my person and effects to the care of the Great Eastern Railway for conveyance to my home in Essex.

At Ely, a little tired of the company and conversation of five East Anglian farmers, who occupied more than their fair share of room and conducted an extremely dull technical conversation with quite surprising heat and vehemence over my head and across my waistcoat, I walked up the platform in search of a little more cubic space. At the very front of the train I found a

third-class compartment containing only a single occupant.

"Hallo, Freak!" I said. "I thought you were bound for London."

"Your surmise," replied my late fag, "is correct. But there was a slight mishap at Peterborough."

"You got left behind?"

"Practically, yes. In point of fact, I was bunged out of the train by Spangle Jerningham."

"Why?"

"He bought some bananas, and I warned him not to. I said some people had been prosecuted only last week for eating fruit in a railway carriage."

"Silly young idiot!" I replied, falling into the trap, even as Jerningham had done. "Why —"

"But they *were*," persisted The Freak. "They were caught sucking dates — off their tickets! And as there was no train on for two hours," he concluded, neatly dodging "The Strand Magazine," "I decided to come round this way. We get to Liverpool Street by four. How far are you going?"

I told him, and the train resumed its journey through the fenland.

The next stop was Cambridge, where The Freak, suddenly remembering that the railway ticket in his possession was entirely useless for

his present purpose, got out to buy another. I hung out of the carriage window, wondering which of the Colleges the tall yellow-brick building just outside the station might be, and gazing reverentially upon a group of three young men in tweed jackets and flannel trousers, who had temporarily torn themselves from the pursuit of knowledge for the purpose of bidding farewell to the members of a theatrical touring company.

Presently our engine and brake-van removed themselves to a place of refreshment down the line; whereupon a somnolent horse of mountainous aspect, which had been meekly standing by, attached by a trace to an empty third-class coach, took advantage of their absence to tow its burden to the front of our train and leave it there, like a foundling on a doorstep, subsequently departing in search of further practical jokes.

With that instinctive shrinking from publicity which marks the professions of literature, art, and the drama, each of the compartments of the third-class coach bore a label, printed in three colours, announcing that this accommodation was reserved for Mr. Wilton Spurge's Number One Company — I have always desired to meet a Number Two Company, but have never succeeded — in "The Sign of the Cross," proceeding from Cambridge to Liverpool Street, for Walthamstow.

The majority of Mr. Wilton Spurge's followers took their seats at once; but three young ladies, hugging boxes of chocolate, remained in affectionate conversation with the undergraduates upon the platform. Most of the gentlemen of the company still lingered in the refreshment-room. Suddenly there was a gentle tremor throughout the train, as the engine and brake-van reluctantly backed themselves into a position of contact. A whistle blew, and a white flag fluttered far down the platform.

"There's no hurry," observed The Freak, who had returned from the ticket office and was now surveying the passing show with his head thrust out of the window under my arm. "That white flag only means that the Westinghouse brake is working all right."

But the female mind takes no account of technical trifles, least of all upon a railway journey. To a woman flags and whistles all spell panic. At the first blast, a lady (whom I took to be the Empress Poppeia) hastily shepherded every one within reach into the train, and then directed a piercing summons in the direction of the refreshment-room. She was seconded by an irregular but impressive chorus of admonition upon the perils of delay, led by Mercia in person and supported by a bevy of Christian Martyrs and Roman Dancing-Girls.

The whistle sounded again, and a second flag fluttered — a green one this time. There was a concerted shriek from the locomotive and the ladies, followed by a commotion at the door of the refreshment-room, from which eftsoons the Emperor Nero, bearing a bag of buns and a copy of "The Era," shot hastily forth. He was closely followed by Marcus Superbus, running rapidly and carrying two bottles of stout. Three Roman Patricians with their mouths full, together with a Father of the Early Church clinging to a half-consumed pork-pie, brought up the rear.

Deeply interested in the progress of the race, and speculating eagerly as to whether Pagan or Christian would secure the corner-seats, The Freak and I failed for the moment to note that our own compartment was in danger of invasion. But resistance was vain. At the very last moment the door was wrenched open by the guard, and four human beings were projected into our company just as the train began to move. A handbag and two paper parcels hurtled through the air after them.

"Sorry to hurry you, Mr. Welwyn, sir," said the guard, standing on the footboard and addressing the leader of the party through the window, "but we are behind time as it is, with that theatrical lot."

"My fault entirely, guard," replied Mr.

Welwyn graciously. He was a handsome scholarly man of about forty. I put him down as a University Don of the best type — possibly one of the Tutors of a great college. "We should have come earlier. And — er" — here followed the indeterminate mumble and sleight-of-hand performance which accompany the bestowal of the British tip — "thank you for your trouble."

"Thank *you*, sir," replied the gratified menial, and disappeared into space with half-a-crown in his palm. Evidently Mr. Welwyn was a man of substance as well as consequence.

"You did n't ought to have given him so much, father dear!"

This just but ungrammatical observation emanated from the female head of the party; and despite an innate disinclination to risk catching the eye of strangers in public, I turned and inspected the speaker. From her style of address it was plain that she was either wife or daughter to Mr. Welwyn. Daughter she probably was not, for she must have been quite thirty; and therefore by a process of exhaustion I was led to the reluctant conclusion that she was his wife. I say reluctant, for it seemed incredible that a suave polished academic gentleman could be mated with a lady: —

(1) Who would initiate a domestic discussion in the presence of strangers.

(2) Whose syntax was shaky.

(3) Who wore a crimson blouse, with vermilion feathers in her hat.

But it was so. Mr. Welwyn waved a hand deprecatingly.

"One has one's position to consider, dear," he said. "Besides, these poor fellows are not overpaid, I fear, by their employers."

At this, a grim contraction flitted for a moment over Mrs. Welwyn's florid good-tempered features, and I saw suitable retorts crowding to her lips. But that admirable and exceptional woman — as in later days she proved herself over and over again to be — said nothing. Instead, she smiled indulgently upon her extravagant husband, as upon a child of the largest possible growth, and accepted from him with nothing more than a comical little sigh two magazines which had cost sixpence each.

I now had time to inspect the other two members of the party. They were children. One was a little boy — a vulgar, overdressed, plebian, open-mouthed little boy — and I was not in the least surprised a moment later to hear his mother address him as "Percy." (It had to be either "Percy" or "Douglas.") He was dressed in a tight and rather dusty suit of velveteen, with a crumpled lace collar and a plush jockey-cap. He looked about seven years old, wore curls down

to his shoulders, and extracted intermittent nourishment from a long and glutinous stick of licorice.

The other was a girl — one of the prettiest little girls I have ever seen. I was not — and am not — an expert on children's ages, but I put her down as four years old. She was a plump and well-proportioned child, with an abundance of brown hair, solemn grey eyes, and a friendly smile. She sat curled up on the seat, leaning her head against her mother's arm, an oasis of contentment and neatness in that dusty railway carriage; and I felt dimly conscious that in due time I should like to possess a little girl of my own like that.

At present she was engaged in industriously staring The Freak out of countenance.

The Freak, not at all embarrassed, smiled back at her. Miss Welwyn broke into an unmaidenly chuckle, and her father put down "The Morning Post."

"Why this hilarity, my daughter?" he enquired.

The little girl, who was apparently accustomed to academically long words, indicated The Freak with a little nod of her head.

"I like that boy," she said frankly. "Not the other. Too big!"

"Baby *dearie*, don't talk so!" exclaimed Mrs. Welwyn, highly scandalised.

"I apologise for my daughter's lack of reserve — and discrimination," said Mr. Welwyn to me, courteously. "She will not be so sincere and unaffected in twenty years' time, I am afraid. Are you gentlemen going home for the holidays?"

I entered into conversation with him, in the course of which I learned that he was a member of the University, off on vacation. He did not tell me his College.

"Do you get long holi — vacations, sir, at Cambridge?" I asked. "When do you have to be back?"

Youth is not usually observant, but on this occasion even my untutored faculties informed me that Mr. Welwyn was looking suddenly older.

"I am not going back," he said briefly. Then he smiled, a little mechanically, and initiated a discussion on compound locomotives.

Presently his attention was caught by some occurrence at the other end of the compartment. He laughed.

"My daughter appears to be pressing her companionship upon your friend with a distressing lack of modesty," he said.

I turned. The Freak had installed his admirer in the corner-seat beside him, and, having found paper and pencil, was engaged in turning out masterpieces of art at her behest. With a flat suitcase for a desk, he was executing — so far as

the Great Eastern Railway would permit him — a portrait of Miss Welwyn herself; his model, pleasantly thrilled, affectionately clasping one of his arms in both of hers and breathing heavily through her small nose, which she held about six inches from the paper.

Finally the likeness was completed and presented.

"Now draw a cow," said Miss Welwyn immediately.

The Freak meekly set to work again.

Then came the inevitable question.

"What's her name?"

The artist considered.

"Sylvia," he said at length. Sylvia, I knew, was the name of his sister.

"Not like that name!" said the child, more prophetically than she knew.

The Freak apologised and suggested Mary Ann, which so pleased his patroness that she immediately lodged an order for twelve more cows. The artist executed the commission with unflagging zeal and care, Miss Welwyn following every stroke of the pencil with critical interest and numbering off the animals as they were created.

About this time Master Percy Welwyn, who had fallen into a fitful slumber, woke up and loudly expressed a desire for a commodity which

he described as "kike." His mother supplied his needs from a string-bag. Refreshed and appeased, he slept anew.

Meanwhile the herd of cows had been completed, and The Freak was immediately set to work to find names for each. The appellation Mary Ann had established a fatal precedent, for The Freak's employer ruthlessly demanded a double title for each of Mary Ann's successors. Appealed to for a personal contribution, she shook her small head firmly: to her, evidently, in common with the rest of her sex, destructive criticism of male endeavour was woman's true sphere in life. But when the despairing Freak, after submitting Mabel-Maud, Emily-Kate, Elizabeth-Jane, and Maria-Theresa, made a second pathetic appeal for assistance, the lady so far relented as to suggest "Seener Angler" — a form of address which, though neither bovine nor feminine, seemed to me to come naturally enough from the daughter of a Don, but caused Mr. and Mrs. Welwyn to exchange glances.

At last the tale was completed, — I think the last cow was christened "Bishop's Stortford," through which station we were passing at the moment, — and the exhausted Freak smilingly laid down his pencil. But no one who has ever embarked upon that most comprehensive and interminable of enterprises, the entertainment

of a child, will be surprised to hear that Miss Welwyn now laid a pudgy fore-finger upon the first cow, and enquired: —

"Where *that* cow going?"

"Cambridge," answered The Freak after consideration.

"Next one?"

"London."

"Next one?"

Freak thought again.

"Grandwich," he said.

The round face puckered.

"Not like it. Anuvver place!"

"You think of one," said The Freak boldly.

The small despot promptly named a locality which sounded like "Tumpiton," and passed on pitilessly to the next cow.

"Where *that* one going?" she enquired.

"It is n't going: it's coming back," replied The Freak, rather ingeniously.

Strange to say, this answer appeared to satisfy the hitherto insatiable infant, and the game was abruptly abandoned. Picking up The Freak's pencil, Miss Welwyn projected a seraphic smile upon its owner.

"You give this to Tilly?" she enquired, in a voice which most men know.

"Rather."

"Tilly, ducky, don't act so greedy," came the

inevitable maternal correction. "Give back the young gentleman —"

"It's all right," said The Freak awkwardly. "I don't want it, really."

"But —"

There came a shriek from the engine, and the train slowed down.

"Is this where they collect tickets, father?" enquired Mrs. Welwyn, breaking off suddenly.

Mr. Welwyn nodded, and his wife rather hurriedly plucked her daughter from her seat beside The Freak and transferred her to her own lap, to that damsel's unfeigned dolour.

"Sit on mother's knee just now, dearie," urged Mrs. Welwyn — "just for a minute or two!"

Miss Welwyn, who appeared to be a biddable infant, settled down without further objection. A moment later the train stopped and the carriage door was thrown open.

"Tickets, please!"

Mr. Welwyn and I sat next the door, and I accordingly submitted my ticket for inspection. It was approved and returned to me by the collector, an austere person with what Charles Surface once described as "a damned disinheriting countenance."

"Change next stop," he remarked. "Yours, sir?"

Mr. Welwyn handed him three tickets. The

collector appeared to count them. Then his gloomy gaze fell upon the unconscious Miss Welwyn, who from the safe harbourage of her mother's arms was endeavouring to administer to him what is technically known, I believe, as The Glad Eye.

"Have you a ticket for that child, madam?" he enquired. "Too old to be carried."

Mrs. Welwyn looked helplessly at her husband, who replied for her.

"Yes, surely. Did n't I give it to you, my man?"

"No, sir," said the collector dryly; "you did not."

Mr. Welwyn began to feel in his pockets.

"That is uncommonly stupid of me," he said. "I must have it somewhere. I thought I put them all in one pocket."

He pursued his researches further, and the collector waited grimly. I looked at Mrs. Welwyn. She was an honest woman, and a fleeting glance at her face informed me that the search for this particular ticket was to be of a purely academic description.

"I must trouble you," began the man, "for —"

"It must be somewhere!" persisted Mr. Welwyn, with unruffled cheerfulness. "Perhaps I dropped it on the floor."

"Let *me* look!"

Next moment The Freak, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, dropped upon his knees and dived under the seat. The collector, obviously sceptical, fidgeted impatiently and stepped back on to the platform, as if to look for an inspector. I saw an appealing glance pass from Mrs. Welwyn to her husband. He smiled back airily, and I realised that probably this comedy had been played once or twice before.

The collector reappeared.

"The fare," he began briskly, "is —"

"Here's the ticket," announced a muffled voice from beneath the seat, and The Freak, crimson and dusty, emerged from the depths flourishing a green pasteboard slip.

The collector took it from his hand and examined it carefully.

"All right," he snapped. "Now your own, sir."

The Freak dutifully complied. At the sight of his ticket the collector's morose countenance lightened almost to the point of geniality. He was not to go empty away after all.

"Great Northern ticket. Not available on this line," he announced.

"It's all right, old man," explained my fag affably. "I changed from the Great Northern at Peterborough. This line of yours is so much jollier," he added soothingly.

"Six-and-fourpence," said the collector.

The Freak, who was well endowed with pocket-money even at the end of term, complied with the utmost cheerfulness; asked for a receipt; expressed an earnest hope that the collector's real state of health belied his appearance; and resumed his corner-seat with a friendly nod of farewell.

Two minutes later this curious episode was at an end, and the train was swinging on its way to London. Mrs. Welwyn, looking puzzled and ashamed, sat silently in her corner; Mr. Welwyn, who was not the man to question the workings of Providence when Providence worked the right way, hummed a cheerful little tune in his. The deplorable child Percy slept. The Freak, with a scarlet face, industriously perused a newspaper.

As for Miss Tilly Welwyn, she sat happily upon a suitcase on the floor, still engaged in making unmaidenly eyes at the quixotic young gentleman who had just acted, not for the last time in his life, as her banker.

CHAPTER III

IO SATURNALIA!

I

PRESENTLY my turn came.

A small, spectacled, and entirely inarticulate gentleman in a very long gown, after a last glance to assure himself that my coat was sufficiently funereal and my trousers not turned up, took my hand in his; and we advanced mincingly, after the manner of partners in a country dance, over the tesselated pavement of the Senate House until we halted before the resplendent figure of the Vice-Chancellor.

Here my little companion delivered himself of a hurried and perfunctory harangue, in a language which I took to be Latin, but may for all I know have been Esperanto. The Vice-Chancellor muttered a response which I could not catch; impelled by an unseen power, I knelt before him and placed my two hands between his: an indistinct benediction fell from his lips, gently tickling my overheated scalp; and lo! the deed was done. I rose to my feet a Master of Arts of Cambridge University, at the trifling outlay of some twenty pounds odd.

Thereafter, by means of what the drill-book calls a "right-incline," I slunk unobtrusively past two sardonic-looking gentlemen in white bands, and escaped through the open north door into the cool solitude of Senate House Passage, and ultimately into Trinity Street.

I walked straight into the arms of my friend The Freak—The Freak in cap and gown, twenty-two years of age, and in his last year at the University.

"Hallo, Tiny!" was his joyous greeting. "This is topping!"

"Hallo, Freak!" I replied, shaking hands. "You got my wire, then?"

"Yes, what are you up for? I presume it is a case of one more shot at the General Examination for the B.A. Degree — what?"

I explained coldly that I had been receiving the Degree of Master of Arts.

"As a senior member of the University," I added severely, "I believe it is my duty to report you to the Proctors for smoking while in academic dress."

Freak's repartee was to offer me a cigarette.

"Let us take a walk down Trinity Street," he continued. "I have to go and see The Tut."

"Who?"

"My Tutor. Don't get fossilised all at once, old thing!"

I apologised.

"What are you going to see him about?" I enquired. "Been sent down?"

"No. I am going to get leave to hold a dinner-party consisting of more than four persons," replied my friend, quoting pedantically from the College Statute which seeks (vainly) to regulate the convivial tendencies of the undergraduate.

"Ah," I remarked airily — "quite so! For my part, such rules no longer apply to me."

Fatal vaunt! Next moment Dicky was frantically embracing me before all Trinity Street.

"Brave heart," he announced, "this is providential! You are a godsend — a *deus ex machina* — a little cherub sent from aloft! It never occurred to me: I need not go to The Tut for leave at all now! It would have been a forlorn hope in any case. But now all is well. *You* shall come to the dinner. In fact, you shall *give* it! Then no Tut in the world can interfere. Come along, host and honoured guest! Come and see Wicky about it!"

As The Freak hustled me down All Saints' Passage, I enquired plaintively who Mr. Wicky might be.

"Wickham is his name," replied The Freak. "He is nominally giving the dinner. We are going to —"

"Pardon me," I interposed. "How many people *are* nominally giving this dinner? So far, we have you, Wicky, and myself. I —"

"It's this way," explained my friend. "Wicky is nominally the host; he will do the honours. But I have dropped out. The dinner will be ordered in your name now. That's all."

"Why is Wicky nominally the host?" I enquired, still befogged.

"We are all giving the dinner — seven of us," explained The Freak; "all except yourself and The Jebber, in fact. Wicky has to be host because he is the only man who is not going to the dinner disguised as some one else. *Now*, do you understand?"

"There are one or two minor points," I remarked timidly, "which —"

"Go ahead!" sighed my friend.

"Who," I enquired, "is The Jebber? And why should he share with me the privilege of not paying for his dinner?"

The Freak became suddenly serious.

"The Jebber," he said, "is a poisonous growth called Jebson. He is in his first year. He owns bags of money, which he squanders in the wrong manner on every occasion. He runs after Blues and other celebrities, but has never caught one yet. On the other hand, he is rude to porters and bedmakers. He gathers unto himself bands

of admiring smugs and tells them of the fast life he lives in town. He plays no games of any kind, except a little billiards with the marker, but he buttonholes you outside Hall in the evening and tells you how much he has won by backing the winner of the three o'clock race by wire. I think he has a kind of vague notion that he is sowing wild oats; but as he seems quite incapable of speaking the truth, I have no idea whether he is the vicious young mug he makes himself out to be or is merely endeavouring to impress us yokels. That is the sort of customer The Jebber is."

"And you have invited him to dinner?" I said.

"Yes; it's like this. We stood him as well as we could for quite a long while. Then, one evening, he turned up in my rooms when half a dozen of us were there — he is on my staircase, and I had rashly called upon him his first term — and after handing out a few fairy tales about his triumphs as a lady's man, he pulled a photograph from his pocket and passed it round. It was a girl — a jolly pretty girl, too! He said he was engaged to her. Said it as if —" The Freak's honest face grew suddenly hot, and his fingers bit ferociously into my arm. "Well, he began to talk about her. Said she was 'fearfully mashed on him!' That fairly turned our stomachs to begin with, but there was more to come. He

confided to us that she was a dear little thing, but not quite up to his form; and he did n't intend to marry her until he had sown a few more of his rotten wild oats. And so on. That settled me, Tiny! So far I had not been so fierce about him as the other men. I had considered him just a harmless bounder, who would tone down when he got into the ways of the place. But a fellow who would talk like that before a roomful of men about a girl — his own girl — My God, Tiny! what would you do with such a thing?"

"Kill it," I said simply.

"That's what we nearly did, on the spot," said Dicky. "But — well — one feels a delicacy about even taking notice of that sort of stuff. You understand?"

I nodded. The reserve of the youthful male on affairs of the heart is much deeper than that of the female, though the female can never recognise the fact.

"So we simply sat still, feeling we should like to be sick. Then the man Jebson gave himself a respite and us an idea by going on to talk of his social ambitions. He confided to us that he had come up here to form influential friendships — with athletic bloods, future statesmen, sons of peers, and so forth. He explained that it was merely a matter of money. All he wanted was

a start. As soon as the athletes and peers heard of him and his wealth, they would be only too pleased to hobnob with him. Suddenly old Wicky, who had been sitting in the corner absolutely mum, as usual, asked him straight off to come and dine with him, and said he would get a few of the most prominent men in the 'Varsity to come and meet him. We simply gaped at first, but presently we saw there was some game on; and when The Jebber had removed himself, Wicky explained what he wanted us to do. He's a silent bird, Wicky, but he thinks a lot. Here are his digs."

We had reached a house in Jesus Lane, which we now entered, ascending to the first floor.

Dicky rapidly introduced me to Mr. Wickham, who had just finished luncheon. He proved to be a young gentleman of diminutive stature and few words, in a Leander tie. He was, it appeared, a coxswain of high degree, and was only talkative when afloat. Then, one learned, he was a terror. It was credibly reported that on one occasion a freshman rowing bow in a trial eight, of a sensitive temperament and privately educated, had burst into tears and tried to throw away his oar after listening to Mr. Wickham's blistering comments upon the crew in general and himself in particular during a particularly unsteady half-minute round Grassy Corner.

He silently furnished us with cigarettes, and my somewhat unexpected inclusion in the coming revels was explained to him.

"Good egg!" he remarked, when Dicky had finished. "Go round to the kitchen presently. Have dinner in these rooms, Freak. May be awkward for the men to get into College all togged up."

"You see the idea now, Tiny?" said Dicky to me. "Wicky is going to be host, and the rest of us are going to dress up as influential young members of the University. We shall pull The Jebber's leg right off!"

"Do you think you will be able to keep up your assumed characters all dinner-time?" I asked. "You know what sometimes happens towards the end of —"

"That's all right," said The Freak. "We are n't going to keep it up right to the end. At a given signal we shall unveil."

"What then?" I enquired, not without concern.

"We shall hold a sort of court martial. After that I don't quite know what we will do, but we ought to be able to think of something pretty good by then," replied The Freak confidently.

Mr. Wickham summed up the situation.

"The man Jebson," he said briefly, "must die."

"What character are you going to assume?" I enquired of The Freak. "Athlete, politician, peer, scholar —?"

"I am the Marquis of Puddox," said my friend, with simple dignity.

"Only son," added Mr. Wickham, "of the Duke of Damsillie. Scotland for ever!"

"A Highlander?" I asked.

"Yes," said The Freak gleefully. "I am going to wear a red beard and talk Gaelic."

"Who are to be the other — inmates?" I asked.

"You'll see when the time comes," replied Dicky. "At present we have to decide on a part for *you*, my lad."

"I think I had better be Absent Friends," I said. "Then I need not come, but you can drink my health."

Mr. Wickham said nothing, but rose to his feet and crossed the room to the mantelpiece. On the corner of the mirror which surmounted it hung a red Turkish fez, with a long black tassel. This my host reached down and handed to me.

"Wear that," he said briefly — "with your ordinary evening things."

"What shall I be then?" I enquired meekly.

"Junior Egyptologist to the Fitzwilliam Museum," replied the fertile Mr. Wickham.

II

That shrinking but helpless puppet, the Junior Egyptologist to the Fitzwilliam Museum, duly presented himself at Mr. Wickham's at seven-thirty that evening, surmounted by the fez.

Here I was introduced to the guest of the evening, Mr. Jebson. He was a pasty-faced, pig-eyed youth of about four-and-twenty, in an extravagantly cut dress suit with a velvet collar. He wore a diamond ring and a soft shirt. He looked like an unsuccessful compromise between a billiard-marker and a casino croupier at a French watering-place. His right forefinger was firmly embedded in the buttonhole of a shaggy monster in a kilt, whom, from the fact that he spoke a language which I recognised as that of Mr. Harry Lauder, I took to be the heir of the Duke of Damsillie.

The Freak was certainly playing his part as though he enjoyed it, but the other celebrities, who stood conversing in a sheepish undertone in various corners, looked too like stage conspirators to be entirely convincing. However, Mr. Jebson appeared to harbour no suspicion as to the *bona fides* of the company in which he found himself, which was the main point.

I was now introduced to the President of the Cambridge University Boat Club, a magnificent

personage in a made-up bow tie of light-blue satin; to the Sultan of Cholerabad, a coffee-coloured potentate in sweeping Oriental robes, in whom the dignity that doth hedge a king was less conspicuous than a thoroughly British giggle; and to the Senior Wrangler of the previous year, who wore a turn-down collar, trousers the bagginess of which a music-hall comedian would have envied, and blue spectacles.

Mesmerised by Mr. Wickham's cold eye and correct deportment, we greeted one another with stately courtesy: but the President of the Boat Club winked at me cheerfully; the Sultan of Cholerabad, scrutinising my fez, enquired in broken English the exact date of my escape from the cigarette factory; and the Senior Wrangler invited my opinion, *sotto voce*, upon the cut of his trousers.

In a distant corner of the room, which was very dimly lighted, — probably for purposes of theatrical effect, — I descried two more guests — uncanny figures both. One was a youth in semi-clerical attire, with short trousers and white cotton socks, diligently exercising what is best described as a Private Secretary voice upon his companion, a scarlet-faced gentleman in an exaggerated hunting-kit — horn and all. The latter I identified (rightly) as The Master of the University Bloodhounds, but I was at a loss to

assign a character to The Private Secretary. I learned during the evening, from his own lips, that he was the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology.

The party was completed by the arrival of a stout young gentleman with a strong German accent and fluffy hair. He was presented to us as The Baron Guldenschwein. (He actually was a Baron, as it turned out, but not a German. However, he possessed a strong sense of humour — a more priceless possession than sixty-four quarterings or a castle on the Rhine.)

Dinner was announced, and we took our places. Wickham sat at the head of the table, with Mr. Jebson on his right and the Marquis of Puddox on his left. I took the foot, supported on either hand by the President of the Boat Club and the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology. The other four disposed themselves in the intervening places, the Sultan taking his seat upon Jebson's right, with the Baron opposite.

The dinner was served in the immaculate fashion customary at undergraduate feasts and other functions where long-suffering parents loom in the background with cheque-books. The table decorations had obviously been selected upon the principle that what is most expensive must be best, and each guest was confronted with a much beribboned menu with his title

printed upon it. Champagne, at the covert but urgent representation of the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology, was served with the *hors d'œuvres.*

At first we hardly lived up to our costumes. A practical joke which begins upon an empty stomach does not usually speed from the mark. Fortunately The Freak, who was not as other men are in these matters, had entered upon his night's work at the very top of his form, and he gave us all an invaluable lead. The fish found him standing with one foot upon the table, pledging Mr. Jebson in language which may have been Gaelic, but more nearly resembled the baying of one of the University bloodhounds. This gave us courage, and presently the Assistant Theologian and the M.B.H. abandoned a furtive interchange of Rugby football "shop" and entered into a heated discussion with the Senior Wrangler upon certain drastic alterations which, apparently, the mathematical savants of the day contemplated making in the multiplication table.

I devoted my attention chiefly to observing the masterly fashion in which The Freak and the saturnine Mr. Wickham handled Jebson. The latter was without doubt a most unpleasant creature. The undergraduate tolerates and, too often, admires the vicious individual who is reputed to be a devil of a fellow. Still, that indi-

vidual usually has some redeeming qualities. In the ordinary way of business he probably pulls an oar and shoves in the scrimmage as heartily as his neighbour: his recourses to riotous living are in the nature of reaction from these strenuous pursuits. They arise less from a desire to pose as a man of the world than from sheer weakness of the flesh. He is not in the least proud of them: indeed, like the rest of us, he is usually very repentant afterwards. And above all, he observes a decent reticence about his follies. He regards them as liabilities, not assets; and therein lies the difference between him and creatures of the Jebson type. Jebson took no part in clean open-air enthusiasms: he had few moments of reckless self-abandonment: to him the serious business of life was the methodical establishment of a reputation as a *viveur*. He sought to excite the admiration of his fellows by the recital of his exploits in what he called "the world." Such, naturally, were conspicuous neither for reticence nor truth. He was a pitiful transparent fraud, and I felt rather surprised, as I considered the elaborate nature of the present scheme for his discomfiture, that the tolerant easy-going crew who sat round the table should have thought the game worth the candle. I began to feel rather sorry for Jebson. After all, he was not the only noxious insect in the University. Then I remem-

bered the story of the girl's photograph, and I understood. It was an ill day for The Jebber, I reflected, when he spoke lightly of his lady-love in the presence of Dicky Mainwaring.

The banquet ran its course. Presently dessert was placed upon the table and the waiters withdrew. The Sultan of Cholerabad, I noticed, had mastered the diffidence which had characterised his behaviour during the earlier stages of the proceedings, and was now joining freely in the conversation at the head of the table. I overheard Mr. Jebson extending to him a cordial invitation to come up with him to town at the end of the term and be introduced to a galaxy of music-hall stars, jockeys, and bookmakers — an invitation which had already been deferentially accepted by Mr. Wickham and the Marquis of Puddox. In return, the Sultan announced that the harem at Cholerabad was open to inspection by select parties of visitors on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on presentation of visiting-card.

The spirits of the party in general were now rising rapidly, and more than once the tranquillity of the proceedings was seriously imperilled. After the Baron Guldenschwein had been frustrated in an attempt to recite an ode in praise of the Master of the Bloodhounds (on the somewhat inadequate grounds that "I myself wear always bogskin boods"), our nominal host found himself

compelled to cope with the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology, who, rising unsteadily to his legs, proclaimed his intention of giving imitations of a few celebrated actors, beginning with Sir Henry Irving. The Theologian was in a condition which rendered censure and argument equally futile. He had consumed perhaps half a bottle of champagne and two glasses of port, so it was obvious that his present exalted condition was due not so much to the depths of his potations as to the shallowness of his accommodation for the same. I for one, having drunk at least as much as he and feeling painfully decorous, forbore to judge him. The rest of the company were sober enough, but leniently disposed, and our theological friend was allowed his way. He threw himself into a convulsive attitude, mouthed out an entirely unintelligible limerick about a young man from Patagonia, and sat down abruptly, well pleased with his performance.

Then came an ominous silence. The time for business was at hand. Mr. Jebson, still impervious to atmospheric influence, selected this moment for weaving his own shroud. He rose to his feet and made a speech. He addressed us as "fellow-sports"; he referred to Mr. Wickham as "our worthy Chair," and to myself as "our young friend Mr. Vice." The company as a whole he designated "hot stuff." After express-

ing, with evident sincerity, the pleasure with which he found himself in his present company, he revealed to us the true purport of his uprising, which was to propose the toast of "The Girls." Under the circumstances a more unfortunate selection of subject could not have been made. The speaker had barely concluded his opening sentence when the Marquis of Puddox, speaking in his natural tone of voice, rose to his feet and brought what promised to be a rather nauseous eulogy to a summary conclusion.

"Dry up," he rapped out, "and sit down at once. Clear the table, you fellows, and get the tablecloth off."

Without further ado the distinguished company present, with the exception of the Theologian, who had retired into a corner by himself to rehearse an imitation, obeyed Dicky's behest. The decanters and glasses were removed to the sideboard, and the cloth was whipped off.

"Take this loathsome sweep," continued the Marquis in the same dispassionate voice, indicating the guest of the evening, now as white as his own shirt-front, "and tie him up with table-napkins."

The dazed Jebson offered no resistance. Presently he found himself lying flat on his back upon the table, his arms and legs pinioned by Mr. Wickham's table-linen.

"Roll him up in the tablecloth," was The Freak's next order, "and set him on a chair."

This time Jebson found his tongue.

"Gentlemen all," he gasped between revolutions — the Master of the Bloodhounds and Baron Guldenschwein were swiftly converting him into a snowy cocoon — "a joke's all very well in its way between pals; but —"

"Put him on that chair," continued Dicky, taking not the slightest notice.

Willing hands dumped the mummified and inanimate form of Jebson into an armchair, and the unique collection of Sports sat round him in a ring.

Then suddenly Dicky laughed.

"That's all, Jebson," he said. "We are n't going to do anything else with you. You are not worth it."

Mr. Jebson, who had been expecting the Death by a Thousand Cuts at the very least, merely gaped like a stranded carp. He was utterly demoralised. To a coward, fear of pain is worse than pain itself.

Dicky continued: —

"We merely want to inform you that we think you are not suited to University life. The great world without is calling you. You are wasted here: in fact, you have been a bit of a failure. You mean well, but you are lacking in percep-

tion. There is too much Ego in your Cosmos. Napoleon, you will remember, suffered from the same infirmity. For nearly two terms you have deluded yourself into the belief that we think you a devil of a fellow. We have sat and listened politely to your reminiscences: we have permitted you to refer to all the Strand loafers that one has ever heard of by their pet names. And all the time you have entirely failed to realise that we see through you. For a while you rather amused us, but now we are fed up with you. You are getting the College a bad name, too. We are not a very big College, but we are a very old and very proud one, and we have always kept our end up against larger and less particular establishments. So I'm afraid we must part with you. You are too high for us. That is all, I think. Would any one else like to say anything?"

"Are n't we going to toy with him a little?" asked the Senior Wrangler. "We might bastinado him, or shave one side of his head."

But Dicky would have none of it.

"Too childish," he said. "We will just leave him as he is, and finish our evening. Then he can go home and pack his carpet-bag. But" — The Freak turned suddenly and savagely upon the gently perspiring Jebson — "let me give you one hint, my lad. Never again mention ladies' names before a roomful of men, or, by God,

you'll get a lesson from some one some day that you will remember to the end of your life! That is all. I have finished. The Committee for Dealing with Public Nuisances is dissolved. Let us —"

"I will now," suddenly remarked a confidential but slightly vinous voice from the other end of the room, "have great pleasure in giving you an imitation of Mr. Beerbohm Tree."

And the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology, who had been neglecting the rôle of avenging angel in order to prime himself at the sideboard for another excursion into the realms of mimetic art, struck exactly the same attitude as before, and began to mouth out, with precisely similar intonation and gesture, the limerick which had already done duty in the case of Sir Henry Irving.

After this the proceedings degenerated rapidly into a "rag" of the most ordinary and healthy type. The company, having dined, had ceased to feel vindictive, and The Freak's admirably appropriate handling of the situation met with their entire appreciation. With relief they proceeded from labour to recreation. Mr. Jebson was unceremoniously bundled into a corner; some one opened Mr. Wickham's piano, and in two minutes an impromptu dance was in full swing. I first found myself involved in an extravagant perversion of the Lancers, danced by

the entire strength of the company with the exception of Baron Guldenschwein, who presided at the piano. After this the Theologian, amid prolonged cries of dissent, gave another imitation — I think it was of Sarah Bernhardt — which was terminated by a happy suggestion of Dicky's that the entertainer should be "forcibly fed" — an overripe banana being employed as the medium of nourishment. Then the Baron struck up "The Eton Boating Song." Next moment I found myself (under strict injunctions to remember that I was "lady") waltzing madly round in the embrace of the Senior Wrangler, dimly wondering whether the rôle of battering-ram which I found thrust upon me during the next ten minutes was an inevitable one for all female partners, and if so, why girls ever went to balls.

Presently my partner suggested a rest, and having propped me with exaggerated gallantry against the window-ledge, took off his dickey and fanned me with it.

After that we played "Nuts in May."

The fun grew more uproarious. Each man was enjoying himself with that priceless *abandon* which only youth can confer, little recking that with the passing of a very few years he would look back from the world-weary heights of, say, twenty-five, upon such a memory as this

with pained and incredulous amazement. Later still, say at forty, he would look back again, and the retrospect would warm his heart. For the present, however, our warmth was of a purely material nature, and the only Master of Arts present mopped his streaming brow and felt glad that he was alive. To a man who has worked without a holiday for three years either in a drawing-office or an engineering-shop in South London, an undergraduate riot of the most primitive description is not without its points.

"The Eton Boating Song" is an infectious measure: in a short time we were all singing as well as dancing. The floor trembled: the chandelier rattled: the windows shook: Jesus Lane quaked.

"Swing, swing, together,"

we roared,

"With your bodies between your —"

Crash!

The flowing tartan plaid which adorned the shoulders of the scion of the house of Damsillie had spread itself abroad, and, encircling in a clinging embrace the trussed and pinioned form of the much-enduring Jebson, had whipped him from his stool of penance and caused him, from no volition of his own, to join the glad throng of waltzers, much as a derelict tree-trunk joins a

whirlpool. In a trice the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology and the President of the University Boat Club, who were performing an intricate reversing movement at the moment, tripped heavily backwards over his prostrate form, while the Most Noble the Marquis of Puddox (and lady), brought up in full career by the stoutly resisting plaid, fell side by side upon the field. The Senior Wrangler and the Junior Egyptologist, whirling like dervishes, topped the heap a moment later. The Baron Guldenschwein and the Master of the Bloodhounds leavened the whole lump.

My head struck the floor with a dull thud. Simultaneously some one (I think it was the Senior Wrangler) put his foot into my left ear. Even at this excruciating moment I remember reflecting that it would be a difficult matter, after this, to maintain a distant or stand-offish attitude towards the gentleman who at this moment was acting as the foundation-stone of our pyramid.

The music ceased, with a suddenness that suggested musical chairs, and I was aware of an ominous silence. Disengaging my neck from the embrace of a leg clad in a baggy silk trousering, — evidently it belonged to the Sultan: how he got into that galley I have no conception, for he had recently relieved the Baron at the piano,

— I struggled to my hands and knees and crawled out of the turmoil upon the floor.

Set amid the constellation of stars which still danced round my ringing head, I beheld a sleek but burly gentleman in sober black, silk hat in hand, standing in the doorway. He was a University bull-dog. We were in the clutches of the Law.

"Proctor's compliments, gentlemen, and will the gentleman what these rooms belong to kindly step —"

It was a familiar formula. Wickham, who had struggled to his feet, answered at once: —

"All right; I'll come down. Wait till I put my collar on. Is the Proctor downstairs?"

"Yes, sir," said the man.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Sandeman, sir."

"Sandy? Golly!" commented Mr. Wickham, swiftly correcting the disorder of his array. Several people whistled lugubriously. Wickham turned to Dicky.

"I'll go down," he said. "You sort out those chaps on the floor."

He disappeared with the bull-dog, leaving Dicky and myself to disintegrate the happy heap of arms and legs upon the carpet. Ultimately we uncovered our foundation-stone, black in the face, but resigned. We unrolled his winding-sheet, cut his bonds, and were administering

first aid of a hearty but unscientific description when there was a cry from Dicky —

"Ducker, you young fool, where are you going to?"

Ducker, it appeared, was the real name of the Assistant Theologian. (As a matter of fact, it was Duckworth.) He was already at the door. Finding his exit detected, he drew himself up with an air of rather precarious dignity, and replied: —

"I am going to speak to Sandy."

"What for?"

"Sandy," explained Mr. Ducker rapidly, "has never seen my imitation of George Alexander as the Prisoner of Zenda. He has got to have it now!"

Next moment the persevering pantomimist had disappeared, and we heard him descending the stairs in a series of kangaroo-like leaps.

"Come on, Bill," said Dicky to me. "We must follow him quick, or there will be trouble."

We raced downstairs into the entrance-hall. The open doorway framed the dishevelled figure of Mr. Duckworth. He was calling aloud the name of one Sandy, beseeching him to behold George Alexander. Outside in the gloom of Jesus Lane we beheld Mr. Wickham arguing respectfully with a majestic figure in a black gown, white bands, and baleful spectacles. With a sinking

heart I recognised one of the two saturnine clerical gentlemen in whose presence I had been presented for my M.A. degree only a few hours before.

"Sandy, old son," bellowed Mr. Duckworth perseveringly, "be a sportsman and look at me a minute!" He was now out upon the doorstep, posturing. "Flavia! Fla-a-a-via!" he yowled.

"It's no good our pulling him back into the house," said Dicky, "or Sandy will have him for certain. Let's rush him down the street, and hide somewhere."

Next moment, with a hand upon each of the histrionic Theologian's shoulders, we were flying down Jesus Lane. Behind us thundered the feet of one of the minions of the Reverend Hugo Sandeman. (The other had apparently been retained to guard the door.) Mr. Duckworth, suddenly awake to the reality of the situation and enjoying himself hugely, required no propulsion. In fact, he was soon towing us — so fast that Dicky, encumbered by his chieftain's costume, and I, who had not sprinted for three years, had much ado to hold on to him. The bull-dog, who was corpulent and more than middle-aged, presently fell behind.

It was raining slightly and there were not many people about, for it was close on ten o'clock. We emerged at the double from Jesus Lane into

Sidney Street, and dashed down the first available opening. It brought us into a narrow alley — one of the innumerable "passages" with which Cambridge is honeycombed. Here we halted and listened intently.

III

Having now leisure to review the incredible sequence of events which had resulted in my being hounded through the streets of Cambridge by the University authorities, — when by University law I should have been one of the hounds, — in company with two undergraduates, one attired as a sort of burlesque Rob Roy and the other in a state of more than doubtful sobriety, I embarked upon a series of gloomy but useless reflections upon my imbecility. My only consolation was derived from the knowledge that I no longer wore the insignia of the Junior Egyptologist, having mislaid that accursed ornament in the course of the evening's revels.

My meditations were interrupted by the voice of The Freak.

"What shall we do next?" he enquired, with great gusto.

"Go home," said I, without hesitation.

"How?"

"Straight on: this passage must lead somewhere."

"Does it? Have you ever been down it before?"

"I can't remember; but —"

"Well, I have, and it does n't lead anywhere, young feller-my-lad. That's why that blamed bull-dog of Sandy's has n't followed us up harder. He knows he has got us on toast. I expect they're all waiting for us at the mouth of this rat-hole now."

Certainly we were in a tight corner. But even now The Freak's amazing resource did not fail him. We were standing at the moment outside a building of rather forbidding aspect, which had the appearance of a parish institute. The windows of one of the rooms on the ground-floor were brightly lighted, and even as we looked a large podgy young man, of the Sunday-School superintendent type, appeared on the front steps. We feigned absorption in a large printed notice which stood outside the door.

The podgy man addressed us.

"Are you coming in, gentlemen? You'll find it worth your while. The professor is only just 'ere, 'avin' missed 'is train from King's Cross; so we are goin' to begin at once." He spoke in the honeyed — not to say oily — accents of a certain type of "townee" who sees a chance of making something out of a 'Varsity man, and his conversation was naturally addressed to me. My two companions kept modestly in the shadows.

"First lecture free to all," continued the podgy young man, smiling invitingly. "Members of the University specially welcomed."

At this moment The Freak emerged into the full glare of the electric light, and nudged me meaningly in the ribs.

"I have two friends with me," I said — "one from Scotland — er — the North of Scotland. I am taking them for an after-dinner stroll, to view the Colleges, and — er — so on."

"All are welcome," repeated the young man faintly, gazing in a dazed fashion at the Marquis of Puddox. "Step inside."

What we were in for we did not know. But it was a case of any port in a storm, and we all three allowed ourselves to be shepherded into a room containing some fifteen people, who, to judge by the state of the atmosphere, had been there some time. Our entrance caused an obvious flutter, and distracted the attention of the room from a diminutive foreigner in a frayed frock-coat, with a little pointed beard and pathetic brown eyes, who was sitting nervously on the edge of a chair, endeavouring to look collected under the blighting influence of a good honest British stare. The three newcomers at once retired to the only unoccupied corner of the room, where it was observed that the clerical member of the party immediately adopted a somewhat

unconventional attitude and composed himself to slumber.

At this point the podgy young man, who appeared to be the secretary of the club, — some society for mutual improvement, — rose to his feet and announced that he had great pleasure in introducing "the professor" to the company. Apparently we were to have a French lesson. We had arrived just in time for the opening ceremony, which we might enjoy free gratis and for nothing; but if we desired to come again — a highly improbable contingency, I thought — we were at liberty to do so every Thursday evening throughout the quarter, at a fee of one guinea.

"I think, gentlemen," concluded the secretary, "that you will find your money 'as been well laid out. We 'ave very 'igh reports of the professor's abilities, and I am glad to see that the fame of 'is teaching 'as been sufficient to attract a member of the University here to-night."

At this he bowed deferentially in our direction, and there was some faint applause. To my horror Dicky promptly rose to his feet, and, returning the podgy young man's bow, delivered himself in a resonant Gaelic whinny of the following outrageous flight of fancy: —

"Hech-na hoch-na hoyah hoo!"

As delivered, I am bound to admit that it

sounded like a perfectly genuine expression of Celtic fervour. Dicky sat down, amid an interested murmur, and whispered hurriedly to me: —

"Interpret, old soul!"

I rose miserably to my feet.

"My friend," I announced, wondering dimly how long it would be before the podgy young man and his satellites uprose and cast us forth, "has replied to your very kind welcome by a quotation from one of his national poets, — er, Ossian, — which, roughly translated, means that, however uncouth his exterior may be, he never forgets a kindness!"

Which was rather good, I think.

There was more applause, which had the disastrous effect of rousing Mr. Duckworth from his slumbers. Finding that every one present was clapping his hands and looking in his direction, he struggled to his feet.

"Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen," he began cheerfully, "in response to your most flattering encore I shall have great pleasure, with your attention and permission, in givin' you my celebrated imitation" — here he began to stiffen into the old familiar epileptic attitude — "of Sir George Irving —"

We drew him down, as gently as possible, into his seat, and the secretary, slightly disconcerted, called upon the lecturer to begin.

The professor rose, and having bowed gallantly to the secretary's wife, the only lady present, — a courtesy which was acknowledged by that young woman, with true British politeness, by a convulsive giggle, — proceeded, in language which betrayed the fact that although he might be able to teach French he could not pronounce English, to explain his *modus operandi*. He proposed, we discovered, to describe in his own tongue some familiar scene of everyday life, suiting his action to the word, and laying his hand, whenever possible, upon the objects mentioned in his discourse, in order to assist us in grasping his meaning.

"*Par exemple*," he explained, "if I touch ze 'at of madam, so" — here he darted across the room and laid a playful finger on the brim of Mrs. Secretary's rather flamboyant headgear, a familiarity which that paragon of British propriety greeted with an hysterical "Ow, George!" — "and say *chapeau*, den you vill onnerstand vat I mean."

"I doubt it, old son," observed Mr. Duckworth gravely.

"To-night," continued the professor, who had fortunately been unable to understand this innuendo, "I vill describe a simple scene zat you all know — *n'est-ce pas?*"

Here he struck an attitude, as if to imply that

they must be careful not to miss this bit, and declaimed: —

"*Ze postman, 'ow 'e brings ze letters.*"

This announcement was greeted with a stony silence.

"I tell you ze title," he added in warning tones, "but after now I spik no more Engleesh."

"Quite right; I would n't if I were you," remarked Mr. Duckworth approvingly.

The professor bowed politely at this commendation from such an exalted quarter, and plunged into his subject.

"*Le facteur, comment il apporte les lettres!*"

The audience, composed exclusively of podgy young men like the secretary, received this exordium with different degrees of self-consciousness, after the manner of the Englishman when a foreign language is spoken in his presence. Some looked extremely knowing, while others stirred uneasily in their seats, and regarded each other with shamefaced grins.

The professor meanwhile had advanced to the window, and was gazing excitedly out into the darkness.

"*Regardez le facteur qui s'approche!*" he cried, pointing with his finger in the direction where I calculated that the Reverend Hugo and his attendant fiends were probably still waiting for us; "*dans la rue, là-bas! Il m'apporte peut-être une*

lettre! Mais de qui? Ah, de —" Here he clutched his heart convulsively, evidently bent upon a touch of humorous sentiment: but a glance at the adamantine countenances of his audience caused him to change his mind, and he continued, rather lamely: —

"*Je descendrai au rez-de-chaussée. Je m'approche à la porte* — pardon, m'sieur!"

The last remark was addressed to Mr. Duckworth, the professor having stumbled over his legs on his way to the door. The Theologian responded politely with an imitation of a man drawing a cork, and the demonstration proceeded.

"*Je saisis le bouton*," continued our instructor, convulsively clutching the door-handle. "*Je tour-r-r-rne le bouton! J'ouvre la porte! Je m'éloigne dans le corridor* — Oh, pardon, m'sieur! Je vous —"

He had torn open the door with a flourish and hurled himself into the passage in faithful pursuance of his system, only to collide heavily and audibly with some unyielding body outside.

"Proctor's compliments, sir," said a deep voice, "but if you are in charge 'ere, will you kindly come and speak to 'im a minute?"

The Frenchman's answering flood of incomprehensible explanation was cut short by the secretary, who rose from his seat and hurried out.

A few questions and answers passed between him and the bull-dog, and then we heard their footsteps dying away in the direction of the front door, where the Reverend Hugo was doubtless waiting.

Next moment the company in the room were surprised, and I firmly believe disappointed, when the three last-joined recruits, after a hurried glance round the walls as if for a humbler means of exit, rose and unostentatiously quitted the apartment by the door.

. . . . . .

Once in the passage, we turned hastily and blindly to the left, leaving behind us the front door, which was blocked by an animated group composed of the secretary, the professor, — what he was doing there I do not know: perhaps he thought that three more pupils were applying for admission, — and the larger of the Reverend Hugo's two bull-dogs, while that avenging angel's voice could be heard uplifted in a stately harangue outside.

We scuttled up the passage and dived through the first door that presented itself, closing and locking it behind us. On turning up the electric light we found ourselves in a large deserted room, occupied by two bagatelle tables. It was unfortunately lighted from the roof, which put

escape by the window out of the question. However, at the far end we spied another door. Through this we rushed, into what appeared to be a recreation-room, occupied solely by two spectacled gentlemen immersed in a game of chess. Their surprise when three total strangers, two in unusual dress and all in an obvious hurry, invaded the privacy of their apartment, only to make a hasty and undignified exit by the window, must have been considerable, but we did not stay to observe it.

IV

Three weeks later The Freak came up to town for his Easter vacation, and dined with me at my club, and I heard the end of the tale.

Nothing very dreadful had happened, it appeared. Mr. Wickham, having laconically accepted full responsibility for the riot in his rooms, had been gated at eight for the rest of the term. The fact that I had ordered the dinner was unknown to the Proctors, and the College cook had not enlightened them. The identity of the Marquis of Puddox, the Junior Egyptologist, and the Assistant Professor of Comparative Theology had never been discovered.

"So your guilty secret, old thing," concluded Dicky, "is safe. And now I want to invite you to another function."

"Thank you," I said gruffly, "but I think not. What sort of function is it this time?"

"A wedding," replied Dicky unexpectedly.

"Great Scott! Yours?"

"No — The Jebber's! He has grown quite a white man. The little homily which I took the liberty of delivering to him that evening, coupled with the very light sentence imposed, quite won his heart, it appears. He never leaves me now. Eats out of my hand. He is going down at the end of the May term like a sensible Jebber, and he is to be married to his girl in June."

"The girl of the photograph?"

"Yes. He has quite got over his wild-oats theories, and his girl now has him completely in hand. I have seen them together, and I know. They are very happy."

My romantic friend sighed comfortably, and concluded: —

"I have promised to be best man."

"You?"

"Yes; he asked me, and one can't decline. You are coming with me, fellow-sport, to represent the Senior Members of the University!"

I went. No one ever refuses anything to The Freak.

BOOK TWO

A BLIND ALLEY

CHAPTER IV

TRAVELS WITH A FIRST RESERVE

I ARRIVED at Shotley Beauchamp (for Widgerley and the Sludyard Valley Branch) with my heart gradually settling into my boots.

Most of us — men, not women: a woman, I fancy, provided she knows that her hat is on straight, is prepared to look the whole world in the face at any moment — are familiar with the sinking sensation which accompanies us to the door of a house to which we have been bidden as a guest for the first time. We foresee ahead of us a long vista of explanations, and for the moment we hate explanations more than anything on earth.

First, we shall have to explain ourselves to the butler. Then, pending the tardy appearance of our host and hostess, we shall have to explain ourselves to uninterested fellow-guests. At tea, knowing no one, we shall stand miserably aloof, endeavouring *faute de mieux* to explain our presence to ourself, and wondering whether it would be decent to leave before breakfast next morning. After dressing for dinner we shall come down too early, and have to explain ourselves to an embarrassed governess and a critical little girl of twelve.

There for the present our imagination boggles. Pondering these things, we enquire bitterly why we ever left the club, where, though life may be colourless, no questions are asked.

It is true that these illusions dispel themselves with the first grip of our host's hand, but they usually cling to us right up to the opening of the front door; and as I on this particular occasion had only got as far as the platform of the local station, my soul *adhæsit pavimento.*

After the habit of shy persons, I compiled a list of my own special handicaps as I sat in my solitary smoking-compartment. As far as I can remember they ran something like this: —

(1) I have been roaming about the waste places of the earth for more than ten years, and have entirely lost any social qualities that I ever possessed.

(2) For people who like that sort of thing, house-parties are well enough. But I do not understand the young man of the present day, and he apparently does not understand me. As for the modern young woman, I simply shrink from her in fear.

(3) I have never met my host and hostess in my life.

(4) It is quite possible that The Freak has forgotten to tell his parents that he has invited me.

(5) In any case I probably shall not be met at the station, and there are never any conveyances to be had at these places. Altogether —

At this moment the train drew up at Shotley Beauchamp, and a smiling groom opened the door and enquired if I were for The Towers. Item Number Five was accordingly deleted from my catalogue of woes. Two minutes later Items One to Four slipped silently away into the limbo of those things that do not matter. A girl was sitting in the brougham outside the station.

"Lady goin' up, too, sir," remarked the groom into my ear. "Her maid," he added, "is in the dogcart. You got a man, sir?"

"No."

The groom touched his hat and departed, doubtless to comfort the maid.

I paused at the carriage-door, and by means of a terrifying cough intimated that I, too, had been invited to The Towers, and, although a stranger and unintroduced, begged leave in the humblest manner possible to assert my right to a seat in the brougham.

I was greeted with a friendly smile.

"Come in! I expect you are Mr. Carmyle."

I admitted guardedly that this was so, and proceeded to install myself in that part of the brougham not already occupied by the lady's hat.

"My name is Constance Damer," said my companion, as the brougham started. "Perhaps you have heard of me?"

"No," I replied, "I have not."

"Not very well put!" said Miss Damer reprovingly.

"I have been abroad for several years," I murmured in extenuation.

"I know," said my companion, nodding her head. "You have been building a dam across something in Africa."

I accepted this precise summary of my professional career with becoming meekness. Miss Damer continued: —

"And I suppose you are feeling a little bit lost at present."

"Yes," I said heartily, "I am."

"You should have said 'Not *now!*'" explained my companion gently.

I apologised again.

"I shall make allowances for you until you find your feet," said Miss Damer kindly.

I thanked her, and asked whom I was likely to meet at The Towers.

Miss Damer ticked off the names of the party on her small gloved fingers. (Have I mentioned that she was *petite?*)

"Mr. Mainwaring and Lady Adela," she said. "You know *them*, of course?"

"No. I saw them once on Speech Day at school fifteen years ago. That is all."

"Well, they are your host and hostess."

"Thank you: I had gathered that," I replied deferentially.

"Then Dicky."

"Dicky? Who is — Oh, The Frea— Yes. Quite so! Proceed!"

"What did you call him?" asked Miss Damer, frankly curious.

"I — well — at school we used to call him The Freak," I explained. "Men very often never know the Christian names of their closest friends," I added feebly. "Who else?"

"There is Hilda Beverley, of course. You have heard of her?"

"N—no. Ought I to have done?"

Miss Damer's brown eyes grew quite circular with surprise.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked incredulously, "that Dicky never informed you that he was engaged?"

"No. You see," I pointed out, anxious to clear my friend of all appearance of lukewarmness as a lover, "I only met him the other day for the first time in fifteen years, and we naturally had a good deal to tell one another; and so, as it happened — that is —" I tailed off miserably under Miss Damer's implacable eye.

"You are his greatest friend, are n't you?" she enquired.

On reflection I agreed that this was so, although I had never seriously considered the matter before. Women have a curious habit of cataloguing their friends into a sort of order of merit — "My greatest friend, my greatest friend but six," and so on. The more sensitive male shrinks from such an invidious undertaking. Dicky and I had corresponded with one another with comparative regularity ever since our University days; and when two Englishmen, one hopelessly casual and the other entirely immersed in his profession, achieve this feat, I suppose they rather lay themselves open to accusations of this sort.

"And he never told you he was engaged?"

I shook my head apologetically.

"Ah, well," said Miss Damer charitably, "I dare say he would have remembered later. One can't think of everything in a single conversation, can one?" she added with an indulgent smile.

I was still pondering a suitable and sprightly defence of masculine reserve where the heart is concerned, when the carriage swung round through lodge-gates, and the gravel of the drive crunched beneath our wheels.

"I hope the old Freak and his girl will be very happy together," I said, rather impulsively for me. "He deserves a real prize."

"You are right," said Miss Damer, "he does."

My heart warmed to this little lady. She knew a good man when she saw one.

"Have they been engaged long?" I asked.

"About a month."

"Where did he come across her?"

"He did not come across her," replied Miss Damer with gentle reproof, as a Mother Superior to a novice. "They were brought together."

"That means," I said, "that it is what is called an entirely suitable match?"

Miss Damer nodded her small wise head.

"From a parental point of view," I added.

"From Lady Adela's point of view," corrected Miss Damer. "Mr. Mainwaring, poor old dear, has not got one."

"But what about The Freak's point of view?" I enquired.

"I can hear you quite well in your ordinary tone of voice," Miss Damer assured me.

I apologised, and repeated the question.

The girl considered. Obviously, it was a delicate subject.

"He seems quite content," she said at last. "But then, he never could bear to disappoint any one who had taken the trouble to make arrangements for his happiness."

"Would you mind telling me," I said, "without any mental reservation whatsoever, whether you

consider that this engagement is the right one for him?"

Miss Damer's eyes met mine with perfect frankness.

"No," she said, "I don't. What is more, the engagement is beginning to wear rather thin. In fact," — her eyes twinkled, — "I believe that Lady Adela is thinking of calling out her First Reserve."

"You mean —"

"I mean," said Miss Damer, "that Lady Adela is thinking of calling out her First Reserve."

A natural but most impertinent query sprang to my lips, to be stifled just in time.

"You were going to say?" enquired Miss Damer.

"I was going to say what a pretty carriage drive this is," I replied rapidly. "You will be glad of a cup of tea, though?"

"Yes, indeed," replied my companion brightly; but her attitude said "Coward!" as plainly as could be.

Still, there are some questions which one can hardly ask a lady after an acquaintance of only ten minutes.

"There is the house," continued Miss Damer, as our conveyance weathered a great clump of rhododendrons. "Are n't you glad that this long and dusty journey is over?"

"Not *now!*" I replied.

My little preceptress turned and bestowed on me a beaming smile.

"That is *much* better!" she remarked approvingly.

CHAPTER V

VERY ODIOUS

I

We found the house-party at tea in the hall of The Towers. The Mainwaring parents proved to be a little old gentleman, with grey side-whiskers and a subdued manner, and an imposing matron of fifty, who deliberately filled the teapot to the brim with lukewarm water upon our approach and then gave me two fingers to shake. To Miss Damer was accorded a "Constance — dear child!" and a cold peck upon the right cheek.

After that I was introduced to Dicky's sister Sylvia — a tall and picturesque young woman, dressed in black velvet with a lace collar. She wore the air of a tragedy queen — not, it struck me, because she felt like a tragedy queen, but because she considered that the pose suited her.

The party was completed by a subaltern named Crick — a jovial youth with a *penchant* for comic songs, obviously attached to the person of Miss Sylvia Mainwaring — and of course, The Freak's lady-love, Miss Hilda Beverley, to whom I was shortly presented.

I am afraid our conversation was not a conspicuous success. Miss Beverley was tall, handsome, patrician, and cultivated, obviously well-off and an admirable talker. Still, it takes two to make a dialogue, and when one's own contributions to the same, however unprovocative, are taken up *seriatim*, analysed, turned inside out, and set aside with an amused smile by a lady who evidently regards a conversation with one of her *fiancé's* former associates as a chastening but beneficial form of intellectual discipline, a man may be excused for not sparkling.

Half an hour later, perspiring gently, I was rescued by The Freak and conducted to the smoking-room.

"You never told me you were engaged, old man," I said, as we settled down to a little much-needed refreshment.

"It's a fact, though," replied The Freak proudly. "*A marriage has been arranged* — and all that. Say when."

"*And will shortly take place*, I suppose?"

"No immediate hurry," said The Freak easily. "There are one or two things that Hilda wants to cure me of before we face the starter. This, for instance." He held up an extremely dilute whiskey-and-soda. "Between meals, that is. Likewise my — er — casual outlook on life in general."

"Miss Beverley will have her hands full," I observed.

"Think so? She will do it, though," replied my renegade friend confidently. "She is a very capable girl. Regards me as her mission in life. I feel jolly proud about it, I can tell you — like one of those reformed drunkards they stand up on the platform to tell people what a Nut he used to be in the old days, and look at him now! By the way, I promised Hilda I would n't use the word 'Nut' any more. Check me if I become too colloquial, old son. Hilda is rather down on what she calls my 'inability to express myself in rational English.'"

"Colloquialism was not formerly a failing of yours, Freak," I said. "As a small boy you were rather inclined the other way."

"As a small boy, yes," agreed The Freak. "But it is not easy to maintain the pedantic habit at a public school," he added feelingly.

"Do you remember once," I continued, "telling old Hanbury, when he dropped upon you for giggling in form, that your 'risible faculties had been unduly excited by the bovine immobility of Bailey minor'?"

"Yes, I remember. Hilda would have been proud of me that day," replied The Freak, sighing over his lost talent. "Now she thinks me too flippant and easy-going. Lacking in dignity, and

so forth. But if you watch me carefully during your stay here you will find that I have very largely regained my old form. I am getting frightfully intellectual. You ought to see us reading Browning together before breakfast. It is a sublime spectacle. Talking of sublime spectacles, we are all going to Laxley Races on Tuesday, and I can give you an absolutely dead snip for the Cup."

The next ten minutes were devoted to a conversation which, from the point of view both of subject-matter and expression, must have undone the regenerative work of several weeks. Fortunately Miss Beverley was adorning herself for dinner at the time — the most austere feminine intellect goes into *mufti*, so to speak, between the hours of seven and eight P.M. — and we made our provisional selections for Tuesday's programme undisturbed.

The student of Browning finished scribbling down the names of horses on the back of an envelope.

"That is all right," he said. "Plumstone for the Shotley Stakes, Little Emily for the Maiden Plate, and Gigadibs or Jedfoot for the big race. The others can keep. Shall we go up and dress for dinner?"

I agreed, and we knocked out our pipes.

"What do you think, by the way," enquired

The Freak casually, "of little Connie Damer?"

I told him.

We were late for dinner.

II

A shy but observant male, set down in an English country-house, soon realises, especially when he has been compelled for a period of years to rely for amusement almost entirely upon his own society, the truth of the saying that the proper study of mankind is Man — with which is incorporated Woman.

At The Towers I became an interested and uneasy spectator of the continued reformation of my friend Dicky Mainwaring. During the same period I had constant opportunities of comparing the characters and dispositions of his first and (presumably) second choices, Mesdames Beverley and Damer, and in a lesser degree of his sister Sylvia.

Further acquaintance with Miss Beverley confirmed my first impression of her. She struck me more and more as exactly the kind of girl whom a careful mother would select as a helpmeet for a somewhat erratic son. She was cool, aloof, capable, and decided, with very distinct ideas upon the subject of personal dignity and good form. She had already cured her *fiancé* of many regrettable habits. Dicky, I found, no longer

greeted under-housemaids upon the stairs with "Hallo, Annie! How is your bad knee getting on?" Instead, he hurried past the expectant damsel with averted eyes. He no longer slipped warm shillings into the hands of beggar-women who assailed him with impossible tales of woe in the back drive: instead, he apologetically handed them tickets of introduction to the Charity Organisation Society, with a packet of which Miss Beverley had relentlessly provided him. He kept accounts. He answered letters by return of post. He perused closely printed volumes, and became enrolled in intellectual societies with mysterious aims and titles difficult to remember.

"Tiny, my bonny boy," he enquired of me one morning after breakfast, "do you happen to have any sort of notion what Eugenics is — or are?"

"I believe," I replied hazily, "that it is some sort of scheme for improving the physique of the race."

Dicky nodded appreciatively.

"I see," he said. "One of old Sandow's schemes. His name is Eugen. That is better than I thought. I was afraid it was going to be another kind of political economy. Hilda wants me to become a local vice-president of the Eugenic Society; and as it seems to be a less pois—

complicated business than most of her enterprises, I think I will plank down five bob and win a good mark."

And off he went, money in hand, to gain an indulgent smile from his Minerva.

Of Sylvia Mainwaring I need only say at present that she was a pale shade of Miss Beverley.

Miss Constance Damer was the exact opposite of Miss Beverley, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Miss Beverley was tall, dark, and stately; Miss Damer small, fair, and vivacious. Miss Beverley was patronising and gracious in her manner; Miss Damer's prevailing note was unaffected *bonhomie*. But where Miss Beverley slew her thousands, Miss Damer slew her tens of thousands; for she possessed what the other did not, that supreme gift of the gods — charm — magnetism — personality — whatever you like to call it. In all my life I have never known a human being who attracted her fellow-creatures with so little effort and so little intention, and who inspired love and affection so readily and lastingly, as Constance Damer. She never angled for admiration; she bestowed no favours; she responded to no advances; but she drew all the world after her like Orpheus with his lute.

That is all I need say about Miss Damer. This

narrative concerns itself with the career of my good friend The Freak, Dicky Mainwaring; and the persevering reader will ultimately discover (if he has not already guessed) that Fate had arranged The Freak's future on a basis which did not include the lady whom I have just described.

With masculine admiration Miss Damer did not concern herself overmuch. We all think lightly of what can be had in abundance. Not that she did not take a most healthy interest in noting what mankind thought of her; but her interest would undoubtedly have been heightened if she could have felt less certain what the verdict was going to be. I honestly believe she would have been thrilled and gratified if some one had passed an unfavourable opinion upon her. But no one ever did.

She had no sisters of her own, so large families of girls were an abiding joy to her. These received her with rapture — especially the shy and gawky members thereof — and made much of her, sunning themselves in the unaffected kindliness of her nature and gloating over her clothes for as long as they could keep her. She was greatly in request, too, among small boys, for purposes of football and the like; but her chief passion in life, as I discovered one afternoon when Dicky and I surprised her at tea with the coachman's

family, was a fat, good-tempered, accommodating, responsive baby.

As for her character in general, I think its outstanding feature was a sort of fearless friendliness. (Miss Beverley may have been fearless, but she certainly was not friendly.) Constance Damer's was the absolute fearlessness of a child who has never yet encountered anything to be afraid of. It is given to few of us to walk through life without coming face to face at times with some of its ugliness. Apparently this had never happened to Miss Damer. I say "apparently," but such a wise and discerning young person as I ultimately found her to be could never really have been blind or indifferent to the sadder facts of this world of ours. Consequently I often found myself enquiring why her attitude towards her fellow-creatures as a whole was so entirely fearless and trustful, when she must have known that so many of them were to be feared and so few to be trusted. I fancy the reason must have been that she possessed the power of compelling every one — man, woman, child, horse, and dog — to turn only their best side towards her. Rough folk answered her gently, silent folk became chatty, surly folk smiled, fretful folk cheered up, awkward folk felt at home in her presence; children summed up the general attitude by clinging to her skirts and begging her to play with them. It

was impossible to imagine any one being rude to her, and certainly I never knew any one who was — not even Miss Beverley.

But she never abused her power. She never domineered, never put on airs, never ordered us about, never revealed her consciousness that we were all her servants. That is true greatness.

. . . . . .

As you very properly observe, this is a book about Dicky Mainwaring. *Revenons à nos moutons!*

CHAPTER VI

FORBIDDEN FRUIT — A DIGRESSION

Lady Adela stood in the hall, engaged in her favourite pursuit of guest-dragooning.

"Mr. Mainwaring is not coming," she announced. "Dick, Hilda, Constance, Sylvia, and Mr. Crick will go in the motor. Mr. Carmyle, will you give me your company in the victoria?"

I smiled wanly and thanked her. Perhaps the punishment fitted the crime, but it was none the less a heavy one. Still, one should not seek out forbidden fruit, or tamper with First Reserves.

Briefly, the facts of the case were these.

After breakfast on the day of Laxley Races — a blazing August morning — Miss Constance Damer invited me to accompany her to the orchard to pick green apples.

"I have a clean white frock on," she explained, "or I would not trouble you."

I assured her that it was no trouble.

We duly reached the orchard, where Miss Damer ate three green apples and presented me with a fourth, which, fearing a fifth, I consumed as slowly as possible, hoping for the sake of our first parents that Eve's historic indiscretion took place in late September and not early August.

Presently we came to a red-brick wall with a south aspect, upon which the noonday sun beat warmly. High up upon its face grew plums, fat, ripe, and yellow.

Miss Damer threw away the core of an apple and turned to me.

"I should like a plum," she said, with a seraphic smile.

The wall was fifteen feet high, and the plums grew near the top.

"I will find a ladder," I replied obediently.

"That would be bothering you too much," said the considerate Miss Damer. "Can't you put your foot in that root and pull yourself up by the branches?"

The branches, be it said, were gnarled and fragile, and lay flat against the wall.

"I think the ladder would be better," I repeated. "My weight might pull the whole thing away from the wall, and then we should have a few observations from Lady Adela."

"You are right; that would never do," replied my right-minded companion gravely. "But I don't know where they keep the ladder, and in any case it would probably be locked up. What a pity I have this white skirt on!"

She turned away. A low tremulous sigh escaped her.

Next moment, feeling utterly and despicably

weak-minded, I found myself ascending the wall, much as a blue-bottle ascends a window-pane. Miss Damer stood below with clasped hands.

"Do be careful, Mr. Carmyle," she besought me. "You might hurt yourself very seriously if you fell. I will have that big one, please, just above your head."

I secured the object indicated and threw it down to her. She caught it deftly.

"There is another one on your left," continued Eve. "Can you reach it?"

I could, and did.

"I will keep this one for you, Mr. Carmyle," said my thoughtful companion as she caught it. "I think I will have one more. There is a perfectly lovely one there, out to your right. You can just get it if you stretch. Throw it down."

The plum in question was a monster, and looked ripe to the moment. I straddled myself athwart the plum tree, much in the attitude of a man who is about to receive five hundred lashes, and reached far out to the right.

"Another two inches will do it," called out Miss Damer encouragingly.

She was right. I strained two inches further, and my fingers closed upon the fruit. Simultaneously the greater part of the plum tree abandoned its adherence to the wall, and in due course, — about four-fifths of a second, I should

say, — I found myself lying on my back in a gooseberry-bush, clasping to my bosom the greater part of a valuable fruit tree, dimly conscious, from glimpses through the interstices of my leafy bower, of the presence of a towering and majestic figure upon the gravel walk beside Miss Damer.

It was Lady Adela Mainwaring, my hostess, armed *cap-à-pie* in gauntlets, green baize apron, and garden hat, for a murderous morning among the slugs.

I struggled to a sitting position, slightly dazed, and not a little apprehensive lest I should be mistaken for a slug.

Neither Miss Damer nor my hostess uttered a word, Lady Adela because her high breeding and immense self-control restrained her; Miss Damer, I shrewdly suspect, because she was engaged in bolting the last evidence of her complicity. But both ladies were regarding me with an expression of pained reproach.

I shook myself free from my arboreal surroundings, and smiled weakly.

"Have you hurt yourself, Mr. Carmyle?" enquired Lady Adela.

"No, thank you," I replied, wondering if I would have received a lighter sentence if I had said yes.

"If you should desire to eat fruit at any time,"

continued Lady Adela in a gentle voice, much as one might address an imbecile subject to sudden attacks of eccentric mania, "one of the gardeners will always be glad to get it for you. You had better go in now and dress, as we start for the races in half an hour. Constance, dearest, run and find Puttick, and ask him if anything can be done for this tree."

Miss Damer tripped obediently away in search of the head-gardener, and Lady Adela led me kindly but firmly past the gooseberry-bushes and other sources of temptation to the house.

I did not see Miss Damer again until I met her with the others in the hall half an hour later.

She projected a sad smile upon me through her motor-veil, and shook her head.

"I hope you did n't hurt yourself," she said softly.

"I hope the last plumstone did n't choke you!" I replied sternly.

At this moment Lady Adela joined the party, and pronounced sentence as recorded at the beginning of this chapter. The other five accordingly descended the steps and began to pack themselves into the motor.

"May I drive, Dicky?" enquired Miss Damer.

No one ever thought of refusing Miss Damer anything. Her request was evidently the merest matter of form, for she was at the wheel almost

as soon as she made it. Even Lady Adela merely smiled indulgently.

"Constance, *dear* child!" she murmured.

Dicky carefully packed his *fiancée* into the back seat, where his sister had already taken her place.

"You had better sit between us, I think," said Miss Beverley.

"I am going to sit in front," said Dicky, "in case Connie does anything specially crack-brained with the car. Crick, old friend, just separate these two fair ladies, will you?"

Mr. Crick obeyed with alacrity. The Freak, heedless of a tiny cloud upon Miss Beverley's usually serene brow, stepped up beside Miss Damer. That lady released her clutch-pedal, and the car, spurting up gravel with its back wheels, shot convulsively forward and then began to crawl heavily on its way.

"We'll put something on for you if you aren't in time for the first race, Bill," called The Freak to me. "What do you want to back?"

I inflated my lungs, and replied *fortissimo:* —

"Plumstone!"

Miss Damer's small foot came heavily down upon the accelerator, and the car whizzed down the drive.

CHAPTER VII

UNEARNED INCREMENT

Lady Adela and I studiously avoided all reference to gardening or diet upon our six-mile drive to Laxley, and reached the course in a condition of comparative amicability.

We arrived just in time to hear the roar that greeted the result of the first race.

"I wonder what has won," I said, as the victoria bumped over the grass.

"I have never been greatly interested in racing," said Lady Adela majestically. "My father was devoted to it, and so is my brother Rumborough. But I never know one horse from another. For instance, I have not the faintest notion which of the two animals now drawing us is Romulus and which is Remus, although Dick says it is impossible to mistake them. But then Dick has a name for every animal in the estate. Ah! there is the motor, against the railings! That is rather a relief. Dear Constance is an excellent driver, Dick says, but she is inclined to be venturesome."

"Miss Damer appears to be a lady of exceptional talents," I observed.

"Yes, indeed!" agreed Lady Adela, with, for her, quite remarkable enthusiasm. "It is a pity she has no money."

I do not know whether the last remark was intended as a lamentation or an intimation. But I understood now why Miss Damer was only First Reserve.

I changed the subject.

"I suppose you do not bet, Lady Adela?"

"I make it a rule," replied my hostess precisely, "to put half-a-sovereign on any horse whose owner we happen to know. One should always support one's friends, should not one?"

I was still pondering in my heart Lady Adela's system of turf speculation, wondering whether if every animal in the race had belonged to a friend she would have backed it, and in any case what benefit or otherwise (beyond shortening the price) one confers upon an owner by backing his horses at all, when the victoria, rolling heavily, came to anchor astern of the motor, and Hilda Beverley, Sylvia, and Crick, who had been standing upon the seats to view the race, turned to greet us.

"I had no idea racing was so exciting, dear Lady Adela," exclaimed Miss Beverley. "I came armed with a copy of 'The Nation,' prepared to spend the afternoon in the back seat of the car, and here I am quite thrilled."

"I am so glad, dear Hilda," said Lady Adela

graciously. "Dick would have been disappointed if you had not enjoyed yourself. Where is that boy, by the way?"

"He and Connie have gone to collect Mr. Carmyle's winnings," said Sylvia.

"Has — ha! h'm! — Plumstone won, then?" I enquired, timorously avoiding Lady Adela's eye.

"Yes, worse luck!" replied Mr. Crick lugubriously. "We were all on Mercutio. But Miss Damer stuck to it that Plumstone was the right horse, and made Dicky put on five shillings for her and five for you. They got three to one, I believe."

At this moment Dicky and Miss Damer returned from the ring, and I was duly presented with six half-crowns.

"Three-quarters of an hour till the next race," announced Dicky. "Better have lunch."

By this time the whole party had become infected with that fierce spirit of cupidity which assails respectable Britons when they find themselves in the neighbourhood of that singularly uncorrupt animal, the horse; and the succeeding half-hour was devoted by seven well-born and well-to-do persons to an elaborate consideration of the best means of depriving a hard-working and mainly deserving section of the community of as large a sum of money as possible.

Our symposium resulted in a far from unanimous decision. Lady Adela, having studied the list of owners' names upon the card, handed me a sovereign and instructed me to seek out a bookmaker who should be both cheap and respectable, and back the Earl of Moddlewick's Extinguisher and Mr. Hector McCorquodale's Inverary. Mr. Crick, the expert of the party, let fall dark hints on the subject of a quadruped named The Chicken. Dicky and I decided to wait until the numbers went up.

"Dick, you must positively back a horse for me this time," announced Miss Beverley.

"You are getting on, Hilda!" replied The Freak, obviously pleased to find his beloved in sympathy with his simple pleasures.

Miss Beverley handed him five shillings.

"And if the horse does n't win I shall never speak to you again," she concluded; and from the tone of her voice I could not help feeling that she meant what she said.

"What is your selection this time, Connie?" asked Sylvia.

Miss Damer produced a dirty pink envelope and began to open it.

Dicky laughed.

"Connie has been patronising a tipster," he said.

"I got this," explained Miss Damer, "from a

man on the course. His name was Lively. He was trying to earn an honest living, he said, by supplying reliable stable information to sportsmen; but he did n't seem to be getting on very well, poor thing! People were standing all round him in a ring, laughing, and nobody would buy any of his envelopes, although he had given lots of them the winner of the first race for nothing. Just then he caught sight of Dicky and me standing on the edge of the crowd. He pushed his way towards us, and said that if I bought one of his tips, he knew it would bring him luck. He said," Miss Damer added with a smile of genuine gratification, "that I was a beautiful young lady. So I bought one of his envelopes, and after that a lot of other people did, too."

Dicky grinned.

"Yes; that was the point at which we ought to have passed along quietly," he said.

"Did n't you?" I asked.

"Bless you, no! Connie had n't nearly finished. She and her friend were as thick as thieves by this time. The conversation was just beginning to interest them."

"What did you find to talk about, Miss Damer?" asked Hilda Beverley curiously.

"I could n't help wondering," Connie continued, "whether he had a wife and children to support; so I asked him if he was married. He

said he was afraid he was, but if ever he became a widower he would let me know. We left after that."

"Constance, *dear* child!" began Lady Adela, amid unseemly laughter.

"It was all right, Lady Adela," Miss Damer assured her. "They were quite a nice crowd, and I had Dicky with me."

"You are a great deal better able to take care of yourself than I am, old lady," said The Freak admiringly.

I saw Miss Beverley's fine eyes rest disapprovingly for a moment upon her philogynistic swain. Then some one asked: —

"What *is* your tip, Connie?"

Miss Damer scanned her paper.

"It 's not very well written," she said. "Perry — Perry— something."

"Periander?" I suggested. "He is on the card."

"Yes — Periander. I shall back him."

"Rank outsider," said Mr. Crick's warning voice.

"I shall back him all the same," persisted Miss Damer, with a little nod of finality. "It would n't be fair to Lively's luck if I did n't. Mr. Carmyle, will you come and find a bookmaker with me?"

We departed together, and pushed our way through the crowd to the ring. On our journey

we passed Miss Damer's *protégé*, still dispensing reliable information in a costume composed of check trousers, an officer's scarlet mess-jacket, stained and bleached almost beyond recognition by the accidents of many race-courses, and a large bowler hat adorned with a peacock's feather. A broken nose made him conveniently recognisable by those (if such there were) who might desire to consult him a second time. Miss Damer, for whom castaways and lame dogs in general seemed to have a peculiar fascination, showed a disposition to linger again; but a timely reminder as to the necessity of getting our money on at once took us past the danger point and saved me from participating in a public appearance.

Presently we found ourselves amid the bookmaking fraternity. The numbers of the runners had gone up, and lungs of brass were proclaiming the odds in fierce competition.

"What does 'six to four the field' mean?" enquired Miss Damer. "I always forget."

I turned to answer the question, but found that it had not been addressed to me. My companion was now engaged in animated conversation with a total stranger, and for the next five minutes I stood respectfully aloof while the pair discussed *seriatim* the prospects of each horse upon the card.

"He says Periander is an outsider," Miss

Damer informed me, as the man moved away, awkwardly raising his hat. "But I think I must back him. Cornucopia is a certainty for this race, he told me." ("A pinch" was what the gentleman had said: I overheard him.) "You had better put something on him."

I meekly assented, and after Miss Damer had found her bookmaker we adventured ten shillings upon Periander and Cornucopia respectively. Public estimation of the former animal's form was such as to secure odds of ten to one for Miss Damer. I was informed that the two steeds owned by the Earl of Moddlewick and Mr. Hector McCorquodale were not running, so a Diogenean search for Lady Adela's cheap and respectable bookmaker was not required of me.

Suddenly a bell rang.

"They're off!" exclaimed Miss Damer. "We can't cross the course now. Come on to this stand."

We raced up a flight of steps, and presently found ourselves on a long balcony in a position which commanded a view of the entire course.

"Your jockey," announced Miss Damer to me, "is pale blue with chocolate sleeves and cap. Mine is red, with white hoops. Can you see them anywhere?"

"I can see mine," I said. "He is having a chat

with the starter at present, but I have no doubt he will tear himself away presently."

"But the others are halfway home!" cried Miss Damer in dismay.

"So I perceive."

"You poor man!"

"Never mind!" I replied quite cheerfully. There is something very comforting about being called a poor man by some people. "Where is your friend?"

"There, in that bunch of four. He is going well, is n't he? That's the favourite, Mustard Seed, lying back."

"I expect his jockey will let him out after he gets into the straight," I said.

"If he is n't very careful," observed Miss Damer with perfect truth, "he will get shut out altogether."

The horses swept round the last corner and headed up the final stretch in a thundering bunch. Suddenly Miss Damer turned to me.

"This is fearfully dull for you," she said.

"Not at all," I assured her. "My horse has just started."

"Come in with me on Periander," pleaded my companion. "You can only lose five shillings."

I closed with her offer by a nod. Some partnerships can be accepted without negotiation or guarantee.

Suddenly the crowd gave a roar. The favourite had bored his way through the ruck at last. He shot ahead. The noise became deafening.

"There goes our half-sovereign!" shrieked Miss Damer despairingly in my ear.

"Wait a minute!" I bellowed. "Periander is n't done for yet."

There came a yet mightier roar from the crowd, and as we leaned precariously over the balustrade and craned our necks up the course, we perceived that a horse whose jockey wore red and white hoops was matching the favourite stride for stride.

"Periander! Periander!" yelled those who stood to win at ten to one against.

"Mustard Seed!" howled those who stood to lose at six to four on.

But they howled in vain. The flail-like whips descended for the last time; there was a flash of red and white; and Periander was first past the post by a length.

We descended into the ring and sought out our bookmaker. There was no crowd round him: backers of Periander had not been numerous; and it was with a friendly and indulgent smile that he handed Miss Damer her half-sovereign and a five-pound note.

"Can you give me two-pounds-ten for this?" she asked, handing me the note.

It was useless to protest, so I humbly pocketed my unearned increment, and we left the ring in search of the rest of our party.

"I have never won gold before," announced the small capitalist beside me, slipping the coins into her chain-purse — "let alone paper." Her smiling face was flushed with triumph.

"I think I know who will rejoice at your victory to-morrow," I said, "and participate in the fruits thereof."

"Who?"

"The coachman's children, the gardener's children, the lodge-keeper's children —"

But Miss Damer was not listening.

"Poor Lively!" she said suddenly. "He gave me that tip, and yet he could n't afford to back the horse himself."

"Tipsters do not as a rule follow their own selections," I said. "I don't suppose, either, that Periander's was the only name contained in those pink envelopes of his. You really ought not —"

"Why, there he is!" exclaimed Miss Damer, upon whom, I fear, my little homily had been entirely thrown away.

We had made a détour to avoid the crowd on our way back to the carriage, and were now crossing an unfrequented part of the course. My companion pointed, and following the direction

of her hand I beheld, projecting above a green hillock twenty yards away, a battered bowler hat, surmounted by a peacock's feather.

"Come this way," commanded Miss Damer.

I followed her round to the other side of the hillock. There lay the retailer of stable secrets, resting from his labours before the next race. Apparently business was not prospering. His dirty, villainous face looked unutterably pinched and woe-begone. His eyes were closed. Obviously he had not lunched. His broken nose appeared more concave than ever.

At our approach he raised his head listlessly.

"Go on, and wait for me, please," said Miss Damer in a low voice.

I obeyed. One always obeyed when Miss Damer spoke in that tone, and evidently some particularly private business was in hand. Already the child's impulsive fingers were fumbling with the catch of her chain purse.

I took up my stand a considerable distance away. I had no fears of Lively. One does not snatch at the purse of an angel from heaven. My only concern was that the angel's generosity might outrun her discretion.

I could hear her making a breathless little speech, but Lively said never a word. I was not altogether surprised. Probably he was afraid of waking up.

Presently she came back to me, smiling farewell at her pensioner over her shoulder.

"You'll give one of them to your wife, won't you?" was the last thing I heard her say.

Then she rejoined me, and we walked on.

"How much money," I enquired severely, "will you have left out of your winnings, after providing for me and your other friend and the families of the coachman and the gardener and the lodge-keeper?"

Again Miss Damer was not attending.

"Poor Lively!" she said softly.

There were tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

A RELAPSE

THE most unpopular man in the group which we now rejoined was undoubtedly Mr. Crick, a blind faith in whose prescience had induced Miss Beverley and Sylvia Mainwaring to adventure an aggregate sum of ten shillings upon Mustard Seed. Ranking a good second in the order of odium came Dicky, who had executed the commission. The fact that he had done so under protest was deemed to have no bearing on the case.

Miss Damer said nothing about our little triumph, and I was well content. There is something very intimate and comfortable about a secret of this kind.

The great race of the day, the Laxley Cup, was now imminent, and, with the exception of Lady Adela, who issued to me from the depths of the victoria a distinctly somnolent injunction to persevere in my support of the property of the Earl of Moddlewick and Mr. Hector McCorquodale, we departed in a body to back our respective fancies.

"Miss Beverley seems a bit put out about

something, my son Richard," I observed, as The Freak and I strolled along in the rear of the party.

Dicky nodded.

"Yes," he said, "she is. She is a dear, but she hates losing money worse than an eye-tooth. I must find a winner for her this time, or I shall have to listen to a song and chorus. You noticed it, too, then?"

"Yes. But it was before she lost money. Do you think she disapproves of —"

"Of the way I trot around after Connie — eh? No, to do her justice, I don't think she minds that a bit. She knows that Connie and I have been pals ever since we were quite small nippers. Besides," concluded my friend with an entirely gratuitous chuckle, "everybody trots around after Connie, don't they?"

I admitted briefly that this was so.

"No; it is the loss of cash chiefly that makes her fractious," continued Dicky. "That, and my want of dignity and repose on public occasions."

"What sort of exhibition have you been making of yourself this time?" I enquired gruffly. Dicky's last remark still rankled.

"Nothing to signify. Hilda and I were taking a stroll on the course together, before you arrived, and I stopped to have a brief chat with an aged

Irish beggar-woman. The old dame had a shilling out of me in no time, and we departed under a perfect blizzard of benediction. Hilda seemed rather miffy about it: said I was making her and myself conspicuous. For the Lord's sake, put me on to a winner for her, old soul!"

"Ask Miss Damer," I said. "She is the member of this party who picks up reliable information."

But Miss Damer was nowhere to be seen.

"She is somewhere in that seething mob, backing horses on her own account," explained Sylvia later. "She said she was n't going to bother any of the men this time. Do you think it is quite safe?"

"Connie knows her way about," said Dicky. "But perhaps we had better go and have a look for her. Do you know which bookie she has been patronising, Tiny?"

"Yes; that gentleman by the railings, with the gamboge waistcoat," I replied. "But she is n't going to him any more. She has taken money off him twice, and considers it unfair to fleece him again. We shall find her looking for a man with a large bank-balance and no children."

"How will she be able to tell?" enquired that simple soul, Mr. Crick.

"From what I know of her," I said, "she will ask him."

Loaded with injunctions and commissions from the other two ladies, Dicky and I pushed our way once more into the crowd of speculators. Finding that the Earl of Moddlewick's Ginger Jim figured upon the programme and was actually proposing to run, I backed that animal on Lady Adela's behalf, blushing painfully before the thinly veiled amazement and compassion of the bookmaker and his clerk. Myself, I supported the favourite, for reasons of my own. Dicky moved feverishly up and down the line, putting money on horse after horse. Apparently Miss Beverley was to back a winner this time.

As I concluded my business, I caught sight of Miss Damer's lilac frock and big black hat in the paddock. She was engaged in an ardent conversation with a group of three — two girls and a man — and I remember wondering whether they were actual friends of hers or acquaintances of the moment, drawn unwittingly but perfectly willingly into the small siren's net. (As it turned out, they were old friends, but I think I may be excused for not feeling certain.) I was a little disappointed at her preoccupation, for I had been hoping for another deed of partnership.

But the starting-bell had rung, and people were clambering on to the stands.

"Which is my horse, Dick?" enquired Hilda Beverley, as we took our places.

This was an obvious poser for my friend.

"I'll tell you in a minute," he said, gazing diligently through his binoculars. "Yes, yes!" He coughed with intense heartiness. "It is doing very well — very well, indeed!"

"But which one *is* it?" asked Miss Beverley impatiently.

"The one in front," replied The Freak, with perfect truth.

The finish was imminent. A hundred yards from the post the favourite cracked, and his place was taken by a raking black horse with a pink jockey, which ultimately won the race with a length in hand.

The bulk of the crowd naturally received the defeat of the favourite without enthusiasm, but a small section near the judge's box raised a loud and continuous yell of jubilation. Evidently some particular stable had "known something" and kept it dark.

"What is the name of that black animal?" I enquired of Dicky.

"Malvolio."

"Did you back him?" I enquired loudly.

"Rather!" yelled Dicky. "Come with me and help me to collect Hilda's winnings for her. Back directly, dear!"

"How many horses did you back in that race?" I enquired, as we elbowed our way to the ring.

"Seven," said Dicky. "Expensive game, executing commissions for your best girl — what?"

"Let us hope this little victory will have the desired effect," I said piously.

"It will be cheap at the price," replied Dicky with fervour.

At the foot of the stand we found Miss Damer taking leave of her three friends. She joined us.

"Will you chaperon me into the ring, please?" she asked of me politely.

I stopped short and gazed at her.

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that you have won again?"

Miss Damer nodded brightly.

"Yes," she said.

"You backed Malvolio — that outsider?"

Miss Damer smiled seraphically. "Yes."

"And where did you get the tip this time?" I enquired.

"I asked the bookmaker," replied Miss Damer simply. "I thought he would know."

"And he gave you Malvolio?"

"Yes. I had thought of backing the favourite, but he would n't let me. He said Malvolio was 'a real snip,' but very few people knew about him. He was a kind man. Come and help me to find him."

We duly discovered her altruistic friend, who smiled at me over his client's head in a resigned

and humorous fashion, as if to imply that there are occasions upon which Homer may be excused from nodding. "If this be Vanity," his expression seemed to ask, "who would be wise?" Who, indeed?

Of all Constance Damer's achievements in the matter of unduly influencing her fellow-creatures, I hold — and always have held — that this was the greatest. I have been present at many of her triumphs. I have seen her tackle a half-drunken ruffian who was ill-treating his wife, not merely subjugating him, but sending the pair away reconciled and arm-in-arm; I have seen her compel crusty and avaricious old gentlemen to pay not only largely, but cheerfully, for bazaar-goods for which they could have had no possible use, and the very purchase of which implicated them in the furtherance of a scheme of which they heartily disapproved; and I have seen her soothe a delirious child into peaceful slumber by the mere magic of her touch and voice. But to interrupt a hard-working, unsentimental, starting-price bookmaker at the busiest moment of his day, for the purpose of eliciting from him information as to the right horse to back, and to receive from him — a man whose very living depends upon your backing the wrong one — not merely reliable but exclusive information, strikes me as a record even for Miss Constance Damer.

Presently Dicky rejoined us.

"Collected your winnings?" I enquired.

"Yes — and handed them over. There are only two runners in the next race. Come and have a look at the merry-go-rounds. I know you love them, Connie."

Miss Damer admitted the correctness of this statement, but declined to come.

"I see Lady Adela over there," she said — "all alone. That's not fair. She has a new toque on, too, poor thing! I will go and take her for a walk round the enclosure. You two can come back presently and give us tea. If you discover anything really exciting in the way of side-shows I will come and see it before the last race."

She flitted away. Two minutes later we saw her, looking like a neat little yacht going for a walk with a Dreadnought, carefully convoying Lady Adela across the course into the enclosure.

"What about Miss Beverley and the others, Freak?" I asked, as we turned away.

"Oh, they are all right," said Dicky shortly. "Leave them alone for a bit longer."

From which I gathered that Miss Beverley was still suffering from what is known in nursery circles as "a little black dog on her back."

A large section of the crowd evidently shared our opinion that the next race would be a tame

affair, for the merry-go-rounds and other appurtenances of the meeting were enjoying abundant patronage as we approached. We passed slowly along the fairway, where hoarse persons implored us, *inter alia*, to be photographed, win cocoanuts, and indulge in three rounds under Queensberry Rules with "The Houndsditch Terror."

Dicky, suddenly throwing off his low spirits, won two cocoanuts; insisted upon being photographed with me upon the beach of a *papier-mâché* ocean, and, although he drew the line at The Houndsditch Terror, submitted his palm to an unclean and voluble old lady who desired to tell his fortune.

He was cautioned by the beldame against a fair man with a black heart — "That's you, old son!" he remarked affectionately to me — and received warning of impending trouble with a dark lady. ("Thanks; I know all about that," he assured her feelingly.) On the other hand, he was promised two letters, a journey across the ocean, and a quantity of gold — precise amount not specified — within a short period of time.

"You have a very peculiar nature," was the next announcement. "You have paid attention to many ladies, but you have never really loved any of them. Your heart —"

"I beg your pardon; I have loved them all!" replied The Freak emphatically.

"Don't be angry with Gipsy, pretty gentleman!" pleaded the aged Sibyl. "Gipsy knows best. Gipsy only says what she reads in the hand. So — but what is this?" She bent closer. "Ah! Very soon, sir, you will meet the lady of your dreams, and you will love her as you have never loved before."

"No, really?" exclaimed Dicky, deeply interested. "Tell me, shall I marry her?"

"Many difficulties and obstacles will be placed in your path," chanted the prophetess. "You will be misunderstood; you will have to deal with peculiar people. Many times you will be tempted to give up in despair. But persevere, and you will triumph in the end. Now, gentleman, cross Gipsy's palm with silver —"

Here high prophetic frenzy tailed off into unabashed mendicancy, and the interview dropped to a purely commercial level. My attention wandered. Not far away a ring of people had collected round some fresh object of interest. I could hear the sound of a woman's voice singing, and the thrumming of a harp. I could even distinguish the air. A fresh number was just beginning. It was "Annie Laurie" — the most beautiful love-song, in my humble opinion, ever written.

"Maxwellton's braes are bonny,
Where early falls the dew —"

Then the voice quavered and ceased, and I found myself wondering what had happened.

"And now, would the other handsome gentleman like to show his palm to Gipsy?" enquired an ingratiating croak at my side.

Realising with difficulty that I was the individual referred to, I turned, to find that our aged friend, having satisfactorily arranged Dicky's future, was now soliciting my patronage.

"No, thanks," I replied. "Come and see what is going on over there, Freak."

"Ah, but Gipsy will tell the gentleman *all*," promised the old lady. "He has a wicked eye," she added, alluringly but incorrectly.

We escaped at last, at a price, and presently found ourselves upon the outskirts of the little crowd which I have already mentioned.

"What is going on inside here?" enquired Dicky of his nearest neighbour.

"Gel singin' to the 'arp," replied the gentleman addressed. He supplemented this information by adding that the lady was no class, and had a nasty cough.

He was right. As he spoke, the voice of the singer broke again, and we could hear the sound of a spasm of coughing.

We elbowed our way into the crowd, which had grown with the easy facility of all racecourse crowds into quite an assemblage; and

presently found ourselves in the inmost ring of spectators.

In the centre of the ring sat an old man on a camp-stool, cuddling a big battered harp to his shoulder. Beside him stood a tall tired-looking woman, very handsome in a tawdry fashion, of about thirty-five. She was dressed as a Pierrette. Her right hand rested upon the old man's shoulder, her left was pressed hard against her chest. She was coughing violently, and her accompanist's hands lay patiently idle in his lap until she should be ready to continue. On the grass beside the old man sat a hollow-eyed little boy, also in regulation Pierrot costume.

I heard Dicky draw his breath sharply. Don Quixote was astir again.

Presently the singer recovered, stood bravely erect, and prepared herself for another effort. The old man's hands swept over the strings, and the harp emitted a gentle arpeggio.

"Like dew on the gowans lying
Is the fall of her fairy feet,
And like winds in summer sighing
Her voice is low and sweet.
Her voice is low and sweet,
And she's all the world to me;
And for bonnie Annie Laurie —"

The song floated up into the blue summer sky, carrying me with it — possibly in pursuit of the

fairy feet (for which I had already found an owner). Exposure, rough usage, mayhap gin-and-water—all these had robbed the singer's notes of something of their pristine freshness; but they rang out pure and limpid for all that. It was a trained voice, and must once have been a great voice. The crowd stood absolutely still. Never have I beheld a more attentive audience.

"Grand opera, once," said Dicky's voice softly in my ear. Then — "Oh, you poor thing!"

I recalled my thoughts from their sentimental journey, to realise that the verse had broken off before the end and that the woman was once more in the throes of another attack of coughing, the black pompoms on her little white clown cap vibrating with every spasm. Impatient spectators began to drift away.

I was conscious of a sudden movement beside me, and Dicky's voice exclaimed, in the hoarse whisper which I knew he reserved for conversations with himself: —

"Go on! Be a man!"

Next moment he had left my side and was standing in the centre of the ring, addressing the crowd. He was quite cool and self-possessed, but I saw his fingers curling and uncurling.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted.

"Git out of the ring, Elbert!" suggested a voice, not unkindly.

But The Freak continued:—

"I know we all sympathise with the plucky attempt this lady is making to entertain us under very difficult circumstances."

The crowd, suspicious of a hoax of some kind, surveyed him dumbly.

"I am sure," Dicky went on, "you will agree with me that with such a bad cough our entertainer has no right to be working so hard this afternoon; and I therefore propose, with your kind permission, in order that she may have a rest and get her voice back, to sing you one or two songs myself. I can't sing for toffee; but I will do my best, and I know that you, being sportsmen all, will assist me by singing the choruses!"

He took off his hat, bowed genially, and turned to the harpist. There was a buzz of appreciation and anticipation among the crowd. Evidently Dicky had touched the right note when he appealed to them as sportsmen.

"Can you vamp a few chords, do you think?" I heard him say to the accompanist.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man quickly. "Go on: I'll follow you."

The tired woman sank down upon the trampled grass beside the little boy; The Freak, hat in hand, struck an attitude; and the entertainment began.

I do not know how many songs he sang. He

passed from one to another with amazing facility, discoursing between the verses upon topics well suited to the taste and comprehension of his audience. His songs were not new, and the tales that he told were neither true nor relevant; but they served their purpose. He uplifted his voice and carried us all off our feet. He conducted us over the whole of that field of Music Hall humour which is confined within the following limits: —

(1) Alcoholic excess.

(2) Personal deformity (e.g., Policemen's feet).

(3) Conjugal infelicity; with which is incorporated Mothers-in-law.

(4) Studies of insect life (e.g., Seaside lodgings).

(5) Exaggerated metaphor (e.g., "Giddy kipper").

He enlarged upon all these, and illuminated each. He was unspeakably vulgar, and irresistibly amusing. The crowd took him to their bosoms. They roared at his gags; they sang his choruses; they clamoured for more.

I shouted with the rest. This was the real Dicky Mainwaring — the unregenerate, unrestrained Freak of our undergraduate days — my friend given back to me in his right mind after a lamentable period of eclipse. My heart swelled foolishly.

"Chorus once more, please, gentlemen!" shouted Dicky. "Last time!"

The refined and elevating pæan rolled forth, Dicky conducting: —

"Beer, Beer, glorious Beer!
Fill yourself right up to here!
(*Illustrative gesture.*)
Take a good deal of it,
Make a good meal of it—"

With head thrown back and mouth wide open, I shouted with the rest — and — caught the eye of Miss Hilda Beverley! She was standing exactly opposite to me on the other side of the circle. Next moment she was gone.

. . . . . .

It was the accompanist who gave in first. For nearly half an hour his aged but nimble fingers had followed the singer's most extravagant flights, and he now began obviously to falter.

Dicky seized this opportunity to conclude his performance.

"That is all, gentlemen," he said, with a flourish of his hat. "I know no more. Thank you for your kind attention and assistance. But don't go away. I am going to ask the Colonel here to carry his hat round."

He signalled to the small pale-faced boy to take up a collection, but the child hung back shyly. Evidently he was not accustomed to enthusiastic audiences. Dicky accordingly bor-

rowed his cone-shaped headpiece and set to work himself.

Touch your neighbour's heart, and his pocket is at your mercy. The bell was ringing for the last race, but not a man in that crowd stirred until he had contributed to Dicky's collection. Silver and copper rained into the cap. I saw one sturdy old farmer clap Dicky upon the shoulder with a "Good lad! good lad!" and drop in half-a-crown.

Then the audience melted away as suddenly as it had collected, and we five were left — Dicky, myself, the old man, his daughter, and the recently gazetted Colonel. The daughter still sat limply upon the grass. Dicky crossed over to her and emptied the collection into her lap.

"You had better tie that up in a handkerchief," he said. He spoke awkwardly. He was no longer an inspired comedian — only a shy and self-conscious schoolboy. My thoughts flew back to a somewhat similar scene in a third-class carriage on the Great Eastern Railway many years before.

The woman was crying softly. Her tears — those blessed faith-restoring tears that come to people who encounter kindness when they thought that the world held no more for them — dropped one by one upon the pile of coins in her lap. She caught Dicky's hand, and clung to

it. The Freak cleared his throat in a distressing manner, but said nothing. Far away we could hear the roar of the crowd, watching the last race.

"I must be going now," said Dicky at length. "I hope you will soon get rid of your cough and have good luck again. We all get under the weather sometimes, don't we? Good-bye! Good-bye, Colonel!"

The officer addressed fixed round and wondering eyes upon the eccentric stranger, but made no remark.

"Good-bye, sir," said the woman. "God —"

Dicky released his hand gently and turned deferentially to the old gentleman, who was still sitting patiently at his harp.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said, speaking like a polite undergraduate to an aged don who has just entertained him to dinner, "for your splendid accompaniments. I can't imagine how you contrived to follow me as you did. I'm a pretty erratic performer, I'm afraid. Good-bye!"

He held out his hand.

The old man struggled to his feet, and gave a little old-fashioned bow, but disregarded Dicky's proffered hand.

"Good-bye, sir," he said, "and thank you kindly for what you have done for us."

"Would you mind putting your hand in his,

sir?" said the woman to Dicky. "He can't see it. He's blind," she added apologetically.

Five minutes later we found ourselves back at the railings. The motor was already purring, and Romulus and Remus had been put into the victoria.

Miss Damer hastened up to us. Her brown eyes looked very soft.

"Dicky dear," she said tremulously, "we all saw you, and I think you are a brick. But keep away from Hilda for a bit."

CHAPTER IX

THE ONLY WAY OUT

The ladies, pleading fatigue after their long day, retired early, bringing a somewhat oppressive evening to a timely conclusion. Dinner had been a constrained function, for Miss Beverley's aloofness had cast a gloom upon the spirits of her *fiancé*, and the rest of us had joined with him in a sort of sympathetic melancholy. In the drawing-room afterwards Mr. Crick, whose ebullient soul chafed beneath what he termed "compulsory hump," sat down at the piano and treated us to a musical sketch, — something humorous but lingering. Whereupon Lady Adela awoke out of her sleep, and with a disregard for the performer's feeling that was almost indecent, cut short the entertainment and shepherded her flock to the upper regions.

The four gentlemen adjourned to the billiard-room. Here Mr. Mainwaring and Crick set about a game of billiards — fifty up — at which the latter, with a loftiness of spirit which his subsequent performance entirely failed to justify, insisted upon conceding his elderly opponent twenty-five points. Aided by this generous sub-

sidy and by the fact that the scratch player, in bringing off some delicate long shots into the top pocket, more than once omitted the formality of glancing off one of the other balls on the way, our host made quite surprising progress. His own contributions to the score were mainly derived from a monotonous but profitable system of potting the white and leaving his opponent a double balk. Indeed, the old gentleman reached his points before Mr. Crick had accomplished a feat vaguely described by himself as "getting the strength of the table." Mr. Mainwaring then trotted happily upstairs to bed, followed very shortly afterwards by his highly incensed playfellow.

As the door closed, Dicky put down his pipe and turned to me.

"Bill, old man," he said, "I don't often face facts; but this time I admit that I have fairly torn the end off things."

"You are in disgrace, my boy," I agreed. "What are you going to do about it?"

Dicky pondered, and finally summed up.

"The fact is," he said, "I am not up to Hilda's standard, and never shall be."

I rose, and took my stand upon that tribunal beloved of the Briton — the hearthrug — and looked down upon my friend's troubled countenance.

"Dicky," I began, having blown my nose nervously, "you and I don't usually go deeply into these matters together; but — do you love that girl?"

We two regarded one another deliberately for a minute, and then Dicky shook his head.

"I do not," he said at last. "Not more, that is, than I love half a dozen others. I suppose the truth is," he continued, relighting his pipe, "that I don't quite realise the meaning of the word — yet. Some day, perhaps, the big thing will come to me; but until it does and wipes out everything else, I shall go on imagining, as at present, that I am in love with every girl who happens to attract me or whom I happen to attract —if such a thing is possible. Nature, I suppose — just Nature! Just now I am making the instinctive involuntary experiments that every man must make, and go on making, until he encounters his right mate. Some men, I imagine, are luckier than others. They are not inflammable. They do not make false starts or get down blind alleys. I believe you are one, Tiny, but there are not many. With women, I believe, it is different. They have more intuition than men, and can tell almost immediately whether they have found the goods this time or not. But the average man must just go blundering on, making an ass of himself, and learning by experience. I fall into love read-

ily enough, but have never been able to stay there. That is my trouble. I am therefore forced to the conclusion that I have never really been in love at all."

"That is because you have never met *the* girl, Freak."

"Possibly; but there is another explanation, and that is that I am incapable of a sustained affection under any circumstances whatever. However, you may take it from me that such is not the case. I *know* that. I can't explain it or prove it, but I know it. What I really want — but I have n't met one so far —is a girl who will fall in love with me, and *show* it — show that she is willing to burn her boats for me. A good many young women, estimable creatures, have indicated that they care for me a little, but not one has done it in the way I have described. I don't believe that I could ever really throw myself absolutely headlong into love with a girl unless I knew in my heart that she was prepared to do the same for me. They are all so cautious, so self-contained, so blooming independent, nowadays, that a man simply cannot let himself go on one of them for fear she should turn round and laugh at him. But if a girl once confided to me that she wanted to entrust herself to me — body and soul, for better, for worse, and so on — without any present-day stipulations about maintain-

ing her independence and preserving her individuality, and stuff of that kind — well, good-bye to all indecision or uncertainty on my part! What man who called himself a man could resist such an appeal as that — a genuine whole-hearted appeal from weakness to strength? (Not that I am exactly a model of strength," he commented, with a disarming smile; "but I know I soon should be, if such an honour were done me.) Weakness to strength! That's what it comes to in the end, old man, whatever the modern advanced female may say. Male and female created He them — eh? When I do meet that girl — perhaps she is the girl the old gipsy foretold for me to-day — I shall love her, and slave for her, and fight for her, so long as we both live, just because she is so utterly dependent on me. That is what brings out the best in a man. Unfortunately, I have not yet met her. When I do you may take it from me that I shall cease to be a Freak. Amen! Here endeth the First Lesson. There will be no collection."

His discourse thus characteristically concluded, my friend sat silent and pensive.

This was quite a new Dicky to me.

"You appear to have studied the question deeply and scientifically," I said, frankly impressed.

"My lad," replied Dicky with feeling, "if you possessed a disposition as flighty as mine —"

"Quixotic," I amended.

"All right — as quixotic as mine, and were also blessed with a dear old mother who spent her life confronting you with attractive young women with a view to matrimony, you would begin to study the question deeply and scientifically too. I am only a Freak, and all that, but I don't want to make a mess of a girl's life if I can help it; and that, old friend, owing to my susceptible nature and gentle maternal pressure from the rear, is exactly what I am in great danger of doing. I have had to mark time pretty resolutely of late, I can tell you. And that brings us to the matter in hand. Hilda and I seem to have reached the end of our tether. Something has got to be done."

"It is just possible," I said, "that Miss Beverley has done it already."

"What?"

"It — the only thing that ought to be done."

"What do you mean?"

"When the others went upstairs to bed Miss Hilda retired into an inner drawing-room and sat down at a writing-table. There is no post out of here until lunch-time to-morrow. Therefore she was probably writing to some one in the house."

Dicky nodded comprehendingly.

"Proceed, Sherlock," he said.

"To whom was she writing?" I enquired.

Dicky thought.

"To me," he announced at length. "Economical hobby. No stamps required. Well?"

"Supposing," I continued, "that Miss Beverley has been writing to you to-night — what then?"

"I shall receive a letter from her in the morning," concluded Dicky. "Eh? Wrong answer? Sorry! What will happen, then?"

"You will get your letter to-night."

Dicky looked doubtful.

"Where? When?" he asked.

"That's it. Where and when?"

Dicky pondered.

"On my pin-cushion, when I go upstairs to bed," he said at last — "although it strikes me as a most unmaidenly action for Hilda."

"So unmaidenly," I replied, "that you will probably find the letter on the hall table by your candle. Come and see."

My faith in Miss Beverley's sense of propriety was fully justified, for we found the letter in the hall beside the candlesticks exactly as I had foretold. Probably it had not lain there more than five minutes.

"What do you think of that?" I enquired.

"By Heavens, Holmes," exclaimed Dicky, who after his late lofty flight had characteristic-

ally relapsed into one of his most imbecile moods, "this is wonderful!"

We bore the letter back to the billiard-room.

"Four sheets!" murmured The Freak dejectedly. "Well, the longer I look at them the less I shall like them. Here goes!"

He began to unfold the crackling document.

"What is that protuberance down there, between your finger and thumb?" I enquired. "It may epitomise the letter for you."

Dicky turned the envelope upside down, and shook it over the billiard-table. Something fell out, rolled a short distance, and lay sparkling and shimmering on the green cloth.

Dicky picked up the ring very slowly, and regarded it long and intently. Then he turned to me.

"Thank God!" he said, softly and quite reverently; and I knew he spoke less for himself than for a certain superior young woman upstairs, who considered him flippant, lacking in depth, and altogether unworthy of her.

CHAPTER X

STILL AT LARGE

I saw very little of The Freak the following winter. For one thing, I went abroad again. The Government of the Auricula Protectorate had decided to connect their capital with the sea by means of a canal. I happened to know the district, for I had been engaged eight years previously upon the great dam, thirty miles from Auricula, which now holds in beneficent restraint the turbid waters of the Rumbolo River. I accordingly applied for work in connection with the scheme. By the greatest luck in the world one Vandeleur, C.B., a magnate of no small standing in the Auricula district, happened to be home on leave. He had visited my dam in his official capacity, and had noted that it was still standing. He spoke the word, and I got my canal.

The next four months I spent upon the continent of Africa, sketching, surveying, and drawing up specifications. Then I came home to be married.

At the very first dinner-party to which we were bidden on our return from our honeymoon I encountered The Freak.

I saw him first, so to speak. Covers had been laid, as they say in country newspapers, for twenty-two persons. My wife, through the operation of an inscrutable but inexorable law, had been reft from my side, and was now periodically visible through a maze of table decorations, entertaining her host with what I could not help regarding as the most unfeeling vivacity and cheerfulness. I began to take an inventory of the company. We had been a little late in arriving — to be precise, the last — and I had had no opportunity of observing my fellow-guests. My own partner was a Mrs. Botley-Markham, an old acquaintance of mine. She combined short sight and an astonishingly treacherous memory for names and faces with a rooted conviction that the one infallible sign of good breeding is never to forget a name or a face. ("A truly *Royal* attribute," she had once announced in my presence.) I was therefore agreeably surprised to find that she remembered not merely my face, but my name and *métier*. After putting me at my ease with a few kindly and encouraging remarks upon the subject of canals, she turned to her other neighbour.

"Dear Sir Arthur," I heard her say, "this is indeed a pleasant surprise!"

"Dear lady," replied a hearty voice, "the pleasure is entirely mine."

I leaned carelessly forward to inspect the menu, and shot a sidelong glance in the direction of Sir Arthur. I was right. It was The Freak, in his most acquiescent mood. I wondered what his surname was, and whether he knew it.

"We had such a teeny talk last time we met," continued Mrs. Botley-Markham. "Now we can chat as long as we please."

Heaving a gentle sigh of relief, Mrs. Botley-Markham's rightful dinner-partner helped himself to a double portion of the *entrée* and set to work.

The chat commenced forthwith.

"And how is Gipsy?" enquired Mrs. Botley-Markham.

"Gipsy," replied Sir Arthur without hesitation, "is top-hole."

"How quaint and original you always are in your expressions!" cooed my neighbour. "But I am so glad to hear about Gipsy. Then the dear thing has quite recovered?"

"Absolutely," replied Dicky courageously.

Mrs. Botley-Markham cooed again. Then she enquired, confidentially: —

"Now tell me, what *was* it?"

"What *was* it?" echoed The Freak cautiously. "Ah!"

"Yes; what *was* it?" pursued his interlocutor, much intrigued. "Don't tell me they never found out!"

"Never. At least," admitted The Freak guardedly, "not for some time."

"Then they actually operated without being sure?" exclaimed Mrs. Botley-Markham, shuddering.

Dicky, making up his arrears with a portion of quail, inclined his head gravely, and the quail reached its destination.

"And when they did find out," pursued Mrs. Botley-Markham, clasping her hands — she had finished her quail — "what *was* it? Tell me, dear Sir Arthur!"

Sir Arthur cogitated for a moment, and then took the plunge.

"It was clavicle," he said solemnly.

Assuming that my friend was labouring under the same disadvantage as myself — namely, inability to decide whether Gipsy was a woman, child, horse, dog, cat, or monkey — to invent a mysterious and non-committal disease upon the spur of the moment struck me as quite a stroke of genius on Dicky's part. Connie would enjoy hearing about this.

"How truly terrible!" said Mrs. Botley-Markham, in an awe-struck voice. "Clam — clavicle is a very rare disease, is it not?"

"Rare and mysterious," replied my friend in the same tone. "In fact, the doctor —"

"You mean Sir Herbert?"

"No, the other blo— the other gentleman — the anæsthetist, you know! He told me that he had never encountered a case of it before."

"How truly terrible!" said Mrs. Botley-Markham again. "And all the time you suspected appendicitis."

The Freak acquiesced readily. Here was light. Gipsy apparently was human — not equine, canine, feline, or simian.

"And the little one?" enquired Mrs. Botley-Markham tenderly.

I held my breath. Sir Arthur had reached his second fence.

"The little one," he replied after consideration, "is doing nicely. Not so very little, though, when you come to think of it," he continued, boldly taking the initiative.

"Has she grown so big, then?" enquired Mrs. Botley-Markham, unconsciously giving away another point. The little one's sex was determined. Certainly it was an exhilarating game.

"Quite extraordinary," said Dicky. "How big," he continued cunningly, "would you imagine she was now?"

"Not as big as my Babs?" cried Mrs. Botley-Markham incredulously.

"That," replied The Freak, "is just exactly how big she is." There was the least tinge of disappointment in his voice. Evidently he had

hoped for something more tangible. For purposes of mensuration Babs was useless to him.

"Why 'just exactly'?" enquired Mrs. Botley-Markham doubtfully. "You are very precise about it."

"We met Babs in the Park the other day," replied the audacious Dicky, "and compared them."

Mrs. Botley-Markham frankly gaped.

"But, dear Sir Arthur," she exclaimed — "How?"

"How does one compare — er — little ones?" was the evasive reply of Sir Arthur.

The outraged parent turned upon him.

"You mean to say you laid those two innocents side by side upon the wet grass," she gasped, "and —"

"It was nearly dry," said Dicky soothingly.

I choked noisily, for I was rapidly losing self-control; but neither of the performers in the duologue took the slightest notice of me.

"I shall speak to my nurse to-morrow morning," announced Mrs. Botley-Markham firmly. "I cannot imagine what she was thinking about."

"Don't be hard on her," begged Dicky. "It was my fault entirely."

"It certainly was *very* naughty of you," said Mrs. Botley-Markham, already relenting, "but I forgive you — there!" She tapped the eccentric

Sir Arthur playfully upon the arm. "Tell me, though, what does Gwladys *weigh?* Mere bigness in children is so often deceptive."

Even assuming that Gwladys was also the Little One, it was obvious that Dicky had not yet cleared his second fence. I began vaguely to calculate what a healthy child should weigh. A thirty-pound salmon, for instance — how would that compare with a fat baby? But Dicky made a final and really brilliant effort.

"Fourteen point eight," he said promptly.

"I beg your pardon?" replied Mrs. Botley-Markham.

"Fourteen point eight cubic centimetres," repeated The Freak in a firm voice. "That is the metric system of weights and measures. It is the only accurate and scientific method. All the big doctors have taken to it, you will find. I never allow any other to be employed where Gwladys is concerned. I strongly advise you," he added earnestly, "to have Babs weighed in the same manner. Everybody's doing it now," he concluded lyrically.

Mrs. Botley-Markham quivered with pleasure. An opportunity of getting ahead of the fashion does not occur to us every day.

"I will certainly take your advice, dear Sir Arthur," she replied. "Tell me, where does one get it done?"

"At the British Museum, between seven and eight in the morning," replied The Freak, whose pheasant was growing cold. "And now, dear lady, tell me everything that you have been doing lately."

Mrs. Botley-Markham, being nothing loath, launched forth. She even found time to re-include me in the conversation, disturbing my meditations upon the strenuous awakening which awaited poor Babs upon the morrow with an enquiry as to whether my canal was to contain salt water or fresh. But she had not finished with Dicky yet. Suddenly she turned upon him, and remarked point-blank: —

"How pleased the Stantons will be!"

"Indeed, yes!" replied The Freak enthusiastically.

At the sound of his voice I trembled. We had reached the dessert, and with port in sight, so to speak, it was impossible to tell what foolishness he might not commit.

"In fact," he continued shamelessly, "I happen to know that they are not merely pleased but ecstatic. I saw them yesterday."

"Where?" asked Mrs. Botley-Markham.

"Dear lady," replied Dicky, smiling, "where does one invariably meet the Stantons?"

"You mean at the Archdeacon's?" said Mrs. Botley-Markham.

"I do," said my reprobate friend. "They had all been down the Str — I mean to the Pan-Mesopotamian Conference," he added quite gratuitously.

"Ah, of course; they would," assented Mrs. Botley-Markham hazily, evidently wondering whether she ought to have heard of the Pan-Mesopotamian Conference. "Were they all there?"

"All but the delicate one," replied The Freak, abandoning all restraint.

"Do you mean Isobel?"

"Yes," replied the graceless Richard — "I do. Poor Isobel!" he added gently.

"I am afraid they are not a strong family," said Mrs. Botley-Markham, with a sympathetic glance which rather alarmed me. I foresaw complications.

The Freak wagged his head gloomily.

"No; a weak strain, I fear."

"I hope — I *hope*," said Mrs. Botley-Markham, evidently choosing her words with care and tact, "that the weakness does not extend to Gipsy."

Then Gipsy *was* connected with the Stantons! Freak would have to walk warily. But at this moment his attention was wandering in the direction of our hostess, who was beginning to exhibit symptoms of upheaval with a view to withdrawal. He replied carelessly: —

"No. Why should it?"

Mrs. Botley-Markham, a little offended and flustered at being taken up so sharply, replied with exaggerated humility: —

"I only *meant*, dear Sir Arthur, that if one sister is delicate, possibly another may be slightly inclined —"

Then Isobel and Gipsy were sisters. I knew it!

At this moment the hostess gave the mystic sign, and the company rose. Freak turned a sad and slightly reproachful gaze upon Mrs. Botley-Markham.

"You are forgetting, dear lady," he said gently. "Isobel and Gipsy are not related. Isobel was the sister of my poor first wife."

He drew back Mrs. Botley-Markham's chair with grave courtesy, and that afflicted lady tottered down the room and out of the door, looking like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

The Freak and I resumed our seats.

"Dear Sir Arthur," I said, "are you a knight or a baronet?"

Before this point of precedence could be settled, our host called to us to move up higher.

"I want to introduce you to Sir Arthur Twigg, Mainwaring," he said, indicating a pleasant-looking youth strongly resembling Dicky in appearance and bearing.

"Come to lunch with me to-morrow, Tiny," said Dicky hurriedly to me.

A few minutes later I heard him regretfully explaining to his host that an important legal consultation in his chambers at ten o'clock that evening would prevent him from joining the ladies afterwards in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST TURNING TO THE RIGHT

NEXT day I lunched with The Freak in Hall in the Inner Temple, where I was introduced by my host to the surrounding company as a "distinguished engineer, who had dammed the Nile several times and was now prepared to speak disrespectfully of the Equator."

After luncheon Dicky suggested that I should walk round with him to his chambers in Bolton Street. It was a murky December afternoon. Christmas shopping had set in with its usual severity, and visitors from the country, armed with sharp-cornered parcels, surged tumultuously along the wrong side of every pavement, while the ordinary citizens of London trudged resignedly in the gutter.

Dicky, quite undisturbed by the press, continued the conversation.

"Yes, the family are all very fit," he said. "You must come and stay with us. I shall give myself a week's holiday at Christmas and take you and Connie down to Shotley Beauchamp, and we will have a pop at Ethelbert, our pheasant, and discuss the days that are no more."

"Talking of the days that are no more," I began, stepping aside to avoid a stout lady carrying an inverted baby under one arm and an imperfectly draped rocking-horse under the other, "what has become —"

"Hilda Beverley — eh?" replied Dicky cheerfully. "I'll tell you all about her. (Don't apologise, sir, really! After all, I still have an eye left, and you very nearly lost your umbrella.) She is engaged, if not married, to an Oxford Don. I believe they are very happy. They go out and sing an ode to Apollo every morning before breakfast, or something of that kind."

A wedge of excursionists clove its way between us, and it was with a voice unconsciously raised that I remarked from the gutter: —

"You had an escape that time, my lad."

"Not at all!" yelled Dicky loyally from the other side of the pavement. ("Mind that kiddie's balloon, old son!) No," he continued, as we converged once more, "I had a very profitable six months. Hilda took immense pains with me, and it was n't her fault that I turned out a failure."

Presently I asked a question which always rose to my lips when I met Dicky after any considerable interval.

"Have your family any fresh matrimonial irons in the fire for you at present?" I enquired.

"No," replied my friend, "I rejoice to say they have not. The market is utterly flat. The Hilda Beverley slump knocked the bottom out of everything, and for the last half-year I have been living a life of perfect peace. I am settling down to a contented spinsterhood," he added, to the obvious surprise and consternation of a grim-looking female in a blue mackintosh who had become wedged between us. "In a few years I shall get a tabby cat and a sampler, and retire to end my days in the close of some quiet cathedral city."

The female in the mackintosh, by dint of using her elbows as levers and our waistcoats as fulcrums, heaved herself convulsively out of our company and disappeared in the crowd, probably in search of police protection. Dicky and I came together again.

"Occasionally," he continued fraternally, "I shall come and stay with you and Connie, and give you advice as to — Bill! Tiny! My son William! Look at that girl's face! Did you catch her profile? Did you ever see anything so lovely in all your life?"

We had reached that spot in the narrowest part of Piccadilly where all the omnibuses in the world seem to stop to take up passengers. Dicky's fingers had closed round my left biceps muscle with a grip like iron. I turned and surveyed him.

His cheery good-tempered face was transfigured: his eyes blazed.

"Look!" he said again, pointing. He was trembling like a nervous schoolgirl.

But I was just too late. All I saw was a trim lithe young figure — rather like Connie's, I thought — stepping on to an omnibus. (When I told the story at home I was at once asked how she was dressed, but naturally could not say.) I caught sight of a pair of slim square shoulders, a good deal of pretty brown hair, and finally a pair of neat black shoes, as their owner deftly mounted to the top of the swaying vehicle.

"I just missed her face, old man," I replied. "Was she pretty?"

Here I stopped. To address empty air in Piccadilly for any length of time causes one to incur the unworthy suspicions of the bystanders. It also causes a crowd to collect, which is an indictable offence.

For I was alone. Afar off, pursuing a motor-omnibus just getting into its top speed, I beheld the flying figure of my friend. Presently he overtook the unwieldy object of his pursuit, hopped on board, and proceeded to climb to the top.

At this moment the omnibus reached Bond Street — the first turning to the right — swung round the corner, and disappeared.

BOOK THREE

THE RIGHT ROAD

NOTE

The main idea of Book Three was suggested by a very minor episode in the closing chapters of 'A Man's Man.' The usual acknowledgments are therefore made to the author of that work.

CHAPTER XII

MICE AND MEN

"Sylvia, is your father in from his walk?"

Miss Sylvia Mainwaring, attired in a sage-green robe and distressingly rational boots, turned and surveyed her male parent's recumbent form upon the sofa.

"Yes, mother mine," she replied. (Sylvia was rather addicted to little preciosities of this kind.)

"Is he awake?"

"He is reading 'The Spectator,' Mother," was the somewhat Delphic response.

"Then ring for tea, dear."

It was a bleak Saturday afternoon in late February. Darkness was closing in, and the great fire in the hall at The Towers flickered lovingly upon our leading weekly review, which, temporarily diverted from its original purpose in order to serve as a supplementary waistcoat for Mr. Mainwaring, rose and fell with gentle regularity in the warm glow.

Mr. Mainwaring's daughter rang a bell and switched on the electric light with remorseless severity; his wife came rustling down the broad oak staircase; and Mr. Mainwaring himself,

realising that a further folding of the hands to sleep was out of the question, peeled off "The Spectator" and sat up.

"Abel," observed Lady Adela — her husband's baptismal name was a perpetual thorn in her ample flesh, but she made a point of employing it on all occasions, as a sort of reducing exercise to her family pride — "tea will be here in a moment."

Mr. Mainwaring rose to his feet. He was an apologetic little gentleman, verging on sixty, with a few wisps of grey hair brushed carefully across his bald head. At present these were hanging down upon the wrong side, giving their owner a mildly leonine appearance. A kindly, shy, impulsive man, Abel Mainwaring was invariably mute and ill at ease beneath the eye of his wife and daughter. Their patrician calm oppressed him; and his genial expansive nature only blossomed in the presence of his erratic but affectionate son.

"Tea?" he exclaimed with mild alacrity — "Who said tea?"

"Abel," announced Lady Adela in tones which definitely vetoed any further conversational openings originating in tea, "I think it only right to tell you that a visitor may arrive at any moment; and your present appearance, to put it mildly, is hardly that of the master of a large household."

"My dear, I fly!" said Mr. Mainwaring hurriedly, and disappeared. At the same moment there was a tinkle in the back premises.

"There goes the front-door bell," said Sylvia. "I never heard the carriage. Can it be Connie already?"

"A caller, probably," sighed her mother. "How tiresome people are. See who it is, Milroy, and then bring tea."

The butler, who had entered from the dining-room, crossed the hall to the curtained alcove which screened the front door.

"Hardly a caller on an afternoon like this," said Sylvia, shivering delicately. "It is raining in sheets."

"My experience," replied Lady Adela peevishly, "has always been that when one's neighbours have made up their minds to be thoroughly annoying, no weather will stop them."

Simultaneously with this truthful but gloomy reflection Lady Adela composed her fine features into an hospitable smile of welcome and rose to her feet.

"Misterilands!" announced Milroy, drawing back the curtain of the outer hall.

Lady Adela, still smiling, rolled an enquiring eye in the direction of her daughter.

"New curate!" hissed Sylvia.

Through the curtained archway advanced a

short, sturdy, spectacled young man, dumbly resisting Mr. Milroy's gracious efforts to relieve him of his hat and stick.

Lady Adela extended her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Highlands?" she enquired, as the ruffled Milroy, shaken off like an importunate limpet, disappeared into the dining-room.

"My name," replied the visitor apologetically, "is Rylands — not Highlands."

"How stupid of me!" said Lady Adela condescendingly. "But my butler is a most inarticulate person, and in any case we give him the benefit of the doubt where H's are concerned."

"It's of no consequence," Mr. Rylands assured her. "Oh, I beg your pardon!"

He picked up his walking-stick, which had fallen upon the polished floor with a shattering crash, and continued breathlessly: —

"The fact is, Lady Adela, the Archdeacon asked me to come round this afternoon and warn Mr. — Mr. —" he was uncertain of Mr. Mainwaring's exact status and title, so decided to hedge — "your husband, about the First Lesson in to-morrow morning's service. The Archdeacon —"

"Be seated, Mr. Rylands," said Lady Adela, in the voice which she reserved for golfers, politicians, and other people who attempted to talk

shop in her presence. "My husband will be downstairs presently. This is my —"

"The Archdeacon," continued the conscientious Rylands, "thinks it would be better to substitute an alternative Lesson —"

At this point his walking-stick, which he had after several efforts succeeded in leaning against the corner of the mantelpiece, fell a second time upon the floor, and a further hail of apology followed.

"— An alternative Lesson to-morrow morning," he resumed pertinaciously, "in view of the fact that certain passages —"

"This is my daughter Sylvia," said Lady Adela coldly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" exclaimed the curate to Sylvia, starting up and dropping his hat. "I did n't see you. My glasses are rather dimmed by the rain. I have come here," he recommenced rapidly, evidently hoping for a more receptive auditor this time, "at the request of the Archdeacon, to see Mr. — your father — about an alteration in the First Lesson to-morrow —"

"I don't think you need trouble, Mr. Rylands," replied the dutiful Sylvia. "My father will probably read the wrong Lesson in any case."

"Who is taking my name in vain?" enquired the playful voice of Mr. Mainwaring, as its owner, newly kempt, descended the stairs.

"This is Mr. Rylands, Abel, who has recently come among us," said Lady Adela. "To assist the Archdeacon," she added, with feeling.

Mr. Mainwaring shook hands with characteristic friendliness.

"Welcome to Shotley Beauchamp, Mr. Rylands!" he said warmly.

"Thank you, sir, very much," replied the curate, flushing with pleasure. "I have called," he continued with unabated enthusiasm — evidently he saw port ahead at last — "at the request of the Archdeacon, with reference to the First Lesson at Matins to-morrow. One of those rather characteristic Old Testament passages — "

"Mr. Rylands," interposed Lady Adela, with the air of one who cannot stand this sort of thing much longer, "how many lumps of sugar do you take?"

"Four, please," replied Mr. Rylands absently, with his finger in Mr. Mainwaring's buttonhole.

Lady Adela's eyebrows rose an eighth of an inch.

"Four, did you say?"

The curate came suddenly to himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said cringingly, "I meant none."

"Then why did you specify four, Mr. Rylands?" enquired Sylvia, who disliked what she called "vague" people.

"Well, the fact is," explained the curate, in a burst of shy confidence —"I always take four when I am alone in my lodgings. But when I go out to tea anywhere, four always seems such a fearful lot to ask for, that — oh, I beg your pardon!"

He had stepped heavily back into a cake-stand, and *patisserie* strewed the hearthrug.

But both crime and apology passed unnoticed, for at this moment Milroy, who had crossed the hall a minute previously, reappeared at the curtained entrance, and announced, in tones of intense personal satisfaction: —

"Mrs. Carmyle!"

Even the female Mainwarings had no eyes for any one else when Connie Carmyle entered a room.

During the mêlée of greetings and embraces which ensued, Mr. Rylands, blessing the small deity who had descended to his aid, found time to right a capsized plum-cake and restore four highly-speckled cylinders of bread and butter to the plate on the bottom storey of the cake-stand. He even succeeded in grinding a hopelessly leaky chocolate *éclair* into the woolly hearthrug with his heel. By the time that the Mainwarings had removed their visitor's furs and escorted her to the fireplace, no trace of the outrage remained. The undetected criminal sat

nervously upon the edge of an *art nouveau* milking-stool in the chimney-corner, waiting to be introduced.

"This is Mr. Rylands, Connie," announced Lady Adela. "Mrs. Carmyle."

"How do you do, Mr. Rylands?" said Connie, holding out her hand with a friendly smile.

Mr. Rylands, with an overfull teacup in one hand and a tiny plate entirely obscured by an enormous bun in the other, rose cautiously to his feet, and bestowing a sickly smile upon Mrs. Carmyle, entered at once upon a series of perilous feats of legerdemain with a view to getting a hand free.

"Let me hold your cup for you," suggested Connie kindly. "That's better!"

The curate, gratefully adopting this expedient, ultimately succeeded in wringing his benefactress by the hand.

"What has the Archdeacon been up to lately?" enquired Connie, gently massaging her fingers.

The curate's face brightened.

"It is curious that you should mention the Archdeacon's name," he said. "The fact is, I have just come *from* the Arch—"

"Constance dear," enquired Lady Adela in trumpet tones, "did you see anything of Dick on your way down?"

"No, Lady Adela," said Connie, extending

a slim foot towards the blazing logs. ("Mr. Rylands, would you mind bringing me one of those little cakes? No, not those — the indigestible-looking ones. Thank you so much!) Are you expecting him for the week-end?"

"Yes, but I am afraid there is a little disappointment in store for him. I invited Norah Puncheon down — a sweet girl, Constance! — but at the last moment she has had to go to bed with one of her throats."

"Poor thing!" murmured Mrs. Carmyle absently. The reason for her own invitation — by telegraph — had just been made apparent to her.

"So perhaps you would not mind keeping Dick amused," concluded Lady Adela. "You and he used to be such particular friends," she added archly.

"Bow-*wow!*" observed Mrs. Carmyle dreamily into Mr. Rylands's left ear.

The curate choked, then glowed with gentle gratification. He realised that he had come face to face at last with one of the Smart Set, of which one heard so much nowadays.

"The naughty boy," concluded the fond mother, "must have missed his train."

"The naughty boy," replied Mrs. Carmyle, "is probably coming down by the four-fifteen. It is a much better train. Mr. Rylands, will you please choose me a nice heavy crumpet?"

"In that case," said Lady Adela, "he will probably be here in about half an hour. Sylvia dear, will you go upstairs and see if Constance's room is ready? I forgot to give orders about a fire."

Sylvia obediently disappeared, and Lady Adela crossed the hall to a chair under a lamp, where her husband was furtively perusing the evening paper. Mr. Mainwaring was now favoured with a brief but masterly display of the fast dying art of pantomime, from which he gathered without any difficulty whatever that he was to remove himself and Mr. Rylands to another part of the house, and that right speedily.

Mr. Mainwaring coughed submissively, and rose.

"Mr. Rylands, will you come and smoke a cigarette with me?" he said.

"Second Chronicles?" remarked Connie's clear voice. "I shall look it up during the sermon tomorrow." The Archdeacon's emissary had unburdened his soul at last.

Lady Adela extended a stately hand. "Goodbye, Mr. Rylands," she said. "My husband insists on carrying you off to the smoking-room."

Mr. Rylands, by this time hopelessly enmeshed in Connie Carmyle's net, sprang guiltily to his feet.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed. "Good-bye! Good-bye, Mrs. Carmyle!"

He shook hands, gathered together his impedimenta, and hurried blindly up the staircase.

"Remember I am coming to hear you preach to-morrow," Connie called after him, with a dazzling smile. "Morning or evening?"

The godly but mesmerised youth halted, and broke out afresh. "I am preaching at Evensong," he began, "but —"

"This way, Mr. Rylands," said Lady Adela patiently, indicating her husband, who was standing by a swing door at the opposite side of the hall.

Mr. Rylands, utterly confounded, pattered headlong downstairs again, and disappeared with Mr. Mainwaring, still apologising.

Lady Adela tapped Connie playfully but heavily upon the cheek. ("*Like being tickled by a mastodon*," wrote that lady to her husband a short time later.)

"Constance dear," she said, with a reproving smile, "you are incorrigible. Now let us sit down and have a cosy chat."

The incorrigible one sat submissively down upon the sofa and waited. She knew that her hostess had not rendered the hall a solitude for nothing.

Presently the cosy chat began. Not too sud-

denly, though. Lady Adela first enquired after the health of Mr. Carmyle, and expressed regret that he had been prevented from accompanying his wife to The Towers.

"He was sent for about his wretched canal," explained Connie. "But he saw me off at Waterloo, and promised to come down on Monday if he could get away."

"Is it the first time you have been parted?" asked Lady Adela.

"Yes," said Connie, in quite a small voice.

Her hostess, suddenly human, patted her hand.

"The time will soon pass, dear," she said. "You will find this house quiet but soothing. I like it much better than town myself. Mr. Mainwaring is no trouble, and things are so cheap. The only drawback is Sylvia. She dislikes the people about here."

"By the way," enquired Connie, recovering her spirits, "what is Sylvia's exact *line* just at present? Last year it was slumming; the year before it was poker-work, and the year before that it was Christian Science. What does that sage-green gown mean? Don't tell me she has become a Futurist, or a Post-Impressionist, or anything!"

"I never attempt," replied Lady Adela, closing her eyes resignedly, "to cope with Sylvia's hobbies. At present she is a Socialist of some

kind. She is evolving a scheme, I believe, under which the masses and classes are to intermarry for the next twenty years. By that time, she considers, social distinctions will have ceased to exist, and consequently the social problem will have solved itself.

Mrs. Carmyle nodded her head comprehendingly.

"I see," she said, "it sounds a good idea. I shall start looking out in the 'Morning Post' for the announcement of Sylvia's engagement to a plumber. Just half a cup more, please."

Lady Adela now decided to begin the cosy chat. She accordingly discharged what is known on rifle-ranges as a sighting shot.

"By the way, dear Constance, have you and your husband seen much of Dick lately?"

"Oh, we meet him about occasionally," replied Connie, casting about for cover — "at parties, and so on."

"I fear," continued Lady Adela, with what the police call "intent," "that the poor boy is lonely."

"The last time I saw him," replied Connie, "he was entertaining five people to luncheon at the Trocadero. He did n't *look* lonely."

"There is a loneliness of spirit, dear," replied Lady Adela gently, "of which some of us know nothing. I think it shows that Dick *must* be

feeling lonely if he requires no less than five people to cheer him up."

"I am sure you are right," said the obliging Mrs. Carmyle.

"Was Norah Puncheon of the party, by any chance?" enquired Lady Adela carelessly.

"No. I did n't know any of the people. Is Norah a friend of Dicky's?"

"They have seen a good deal of one another of late, I believe," replied the diplomatic Lady Adela, much as a motorist with his radiator full of feathers might admit having recently noticed a hen somewhere. "Constance dear," she continued, coming in her maternal solicitude quite prematurely to the point, "you are always so discreet. It is high time Dick was married, and this time I really do think — no, I *feel* it instinctively — that Norah Puncheon is the right woman for him."

"The right woman!" replied the late First Reserve pensively. "How awful that always sounds! The wrong one is always so much nicer!"

"My dear," exclaimed the horrified Lady Adela, "whoever put such a notion into your head?"

"Dicky. He told me so himself."

"Has Norah Puncheon much influence over him, do you know?" continued Lady Adela, falling back on to safer ground.

"Yes, lots," replied Connie, stifling the tiniest of yawns. "There goes your telephone."

"Milroy will attend to it, dear. Let me see," pursued Lady Adela, with studious vagueness — "what were we talking about?"

"Norah Puncheon's influence over Dicky," replied Connie, popping a lump of sugar into her mouth and crunching it with all the satisfaction of a child of six.

"You have noticed it yourself, then?"

Connie, quite speechless, nodded.

Lady Adela beamed. The scent was growing stronger.

"In what way, dear?" she asked, with unfeigned interest.

"Well," said Connie, after an interval of profound reflection, "Dicky wanted to back Prince Caramel for the St. Leger, and Norah would n't let him. He was *so* grateful to her afterwards!"

Lady Adela summoned up a lopsided smile — the smile of a tarpon-fisher who has pulled up a red herring.

"I think her influence goes deeper than that, dearest," she rejoined in patient reproof. "You, who only knew my son as a rather careless and light-hearted boy, would hardly credit —"

"A telephone message, my lady!" announced Milroy, appearing at the dining-room door.

Lady Adela, tripped up on her way to a striking passage, sighed with an air of pathetic endurance, and enquired: —

"From whom, Milroy?"

"From Mr. Richard, my lady."

"Mr. Richard? Where is he?"

"He has telephoned from Shotley Post-Office, my lady," replied Milroy, keenly appreciating the mild sensation he was about to create; "to say that he has arrived by the four-fifteen and is walking up."

"*Walking* — on a night like this?" cried Lady Adela, all the mother in her awake at once. "Tell him to wait, and I will send the motor."

"Mr. Richard said he preferred walking, my lady," rejoined Milroy, growing more wooden as he approached the *clou* of his narrative. "He said he would explain when he arrived. But the luggage-cart was to go down."

"For one portmanteau?"

"For the young lady's trunks, my lady."

"Young lady?" Lady Adela turned a puzzled countenance to her companion. "Constance, dear, was not your luggage sent up with you?"

"Yes," replied Connie, scenting fun; "it was. I fancy this must be some other lady."

Light broke in on Lady Adela.

"Norah Puncheon, after all!" she exclaimed joyfully. "Her throat must be better, and that

headstrong son of mine has compelled her to come down by the four-fifteen."

"And walk up in the rain," supplemented Connie.

"The thoughtless boy!" wailed Lady Adela insincerely. "He will give her pneumonia."

"Perhaps it is n't Miss Puncheon," suggested Connie soothingly.

"But, my dear," said Lady Adela, refraining with great forbearance from slapping the small but discouraging counsellor by her side, "who else can it be?" She turned to Milroy.

"Did Mr. Richard mention if he was bringing the young lady up with him?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady," replied Milroy with unction — "he did."

"Did he mention her name, Milroy?" enquired Connie.

"No, Miss. He just said 'the young lady.' Will there be anything further, my lady?"

"No," snapped Lady Adela; and her aged retainer, as feverishly anxious beneath his perfectly schooled exterior to solve the mystery of his beloved Master Dick's latest escapade as his mistress, departed to lay another place for dinner.

In the hall there was a long silence. The wind roared round the house, and the rain drummed softly upon the diamond panes of the big oriel window.

"It might be some old friend of the family," said Lady Adela hopefully — "some one whom Dick has encountered unexpectedly and invited down. You know his impulsive, hospitable way! Aunt Fanny, perhaps."

"A *young* lady, I think Milroy said," replied the Job's comforter beside her.

"Perhaps," pursued Lady Adela, still endeavouring to keep her courage up, "it is only one of the foolish boy's practical jokes."

These speculations were cut short by the prolonged buzz of an electric bell, followed by the sound of a spirited tattoo executed upon the panels of the front door, apparently by a walking-stick. The Freak (and party) had arrived.

Lady Adela sat bolt upright, almost pale.

"Mercy! here they are!" she said.

Milroy, who had appeared from his lair with uncanny celerity, was already in the outer hall. There was the sound of a heavy door being opened; the curtains bulged out with the draught; and a voice was heard uplifted in cheery greeting.

Then the door banged, and Dicky Mainwaring appeared through the curtains.

He was alone, and very wet.

"What ho, Mum!" he observed, after the fashion of the present generation.

"My son!" exclaimed Lady Adela, advancing with outstretched arms.

Dicky, enduring a somewhat lengthy embrace, suddenly caught sight of a small alert figure on the sofa. Curtailing the maternal caress as gently as possible, he darted forward.

"Connie!" he cried enthusiastically. "What tremendous luck meeting you!" He shook his ancient ally by both hands.

"I want you more at this moment," he continued earnestly, "than at any other period of my life."

Connie Carmyle pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Dicky Mainwaring," she enquired sternly, "where is your lady friend?"

"I was just going to introduce her," replied Dicky, with a rapturous smile. "I wonder where she has got to, by the way. Found a mirror, I expect."

Then he raised his voice and cried: —

"Tilly!"

"Hallo!" replied an extremely small voice; and a shrinking figure appeared in the opening of the curtains.

CHAPTER XIII

LUCIDITY ITSELF

I

"This, Mum," announced Dicky in tones of immense pride, "is Tilly. Miss Welwyn, you know."

He advanced to the girl, who still stood hesitatingly in the opening of the curtains, and drew her forward by the hand.

"Come along, little thing," he said, in a voice which made Connie Carmyle's heart warm to him. "Don't be frightened. I present to you my lady mother. You will know one another intimately in no time," he added untruthfully.

Miss Tilly Welwyn advanced with faltering steps. It was seen now that she was *petite*, almost the same height and build as Connie Carmyle, with great grey eyes and a pretty mouth. She was wrapped in a man's Burberry coat, and wore a motor veil tied under her chin. Rain dripped from her in all directions. Timidly she extended a glistening and froggy paw in the direction of her hostess.

"How do you do, Miss Weller?" said Lady Adela, mystified but well-bred.

"Very well, thank you," replied the visitor in a frightened squeak.

Dicky cheerfully set his parent right upon the subject of Miss Welwyn's surname, and then introduced Mrs. Carmyle.

"Tilly," he said, "this is Connie — one of the very best that ever stepped! Don't forget that: you will never hear a truer word."

The two girls regarded one another for a moment, and then shook hands with instinctive friendliness. The small stranger's face cleared, and she smiled, first at Connie and then up at Dicky.

Thereafter came a pause. The atmosphere was tense with enquiry. One could almost feel the Marconigrams radiating from Lady Adela. But apparently The Freak's coherer was out of order. He merely turned towards the staircase, and exclaimed: —

"Hallo, here are Dad and Sylvia. These are the last two," he added in a reassuring undertone to Miss Welwyn. "Quite tame, both of them."

Mr. Mainwaring's face lit up joyfully at the sight of his son, and he hurried forward.

"Dick, my boy, you've arrived at last! Capital!" He clapped the prodigal on the shoulder.

"Yes, Dad," replied Dicky with equal zest; "we have arrived. This is Tilly!"

Mr. Mainwaring, entirely at sea but innately hospitable, greeted Tilly heartily. "You must be terribly cold," he said. "Come to the fire and let me take off that wet garment of yours."

He led the girl to the blaze, then turned to shoot a glance of respectful enquiry in the direction of his august spouse. It was ignored. Meanwhile Dicky had introduced the languid but far from indifferent Sylvia.

"Now you all know one another," he said. "Sylvia, be a dear old soul and take Miss Welwyn up to your room and give her some dry things, will you? She is soaking, and her luggage is n't here yet. You see," he added a little lamely — Sylvia's patrician calm had rather dashed him as usual — "we walked from the station — did n't we, Tilly?"

Tilly nodded dutifully, eyeing Sylvia the while with some distrust.

"You will take care of her, won't you?" concluded the solicitous Dicky.

"Surely!" replied Sylvia, in her grandest manner. "This way, Miss Welwyn."

She swept across the hall and up the staircase, followed by the small, moist, and mysterious figure of the newcomer.

At the foot of the stair Tilly halted and looked back. Dicky, who had been following her with his eyes, was at her side in a moment.

"What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

The girl laid an appealing hand on his arm.

"Don't leave me, Dicky!" she whispered.

The Freak replied by tucking her arm under his own and propelling her vigorously up to the turn of the stair.

"Don't be a little juggins," he said affectionately. "*I* can't come and change your shoes and stockings for you, can I?"

Miss Welwyn, acquiescing in this eminently correct view of the matter, smiled submissively.

"All right," she said. "Au revoir!"

She ran lightly upstairs after the disappearing Sylvia, turning to wave her hand to Dicky before she disappeared.

Dicky, who had waited below for that purpose, acknowledged the salute, and turned to find Mrs. Carmyle at his elbow.

"Dicky," announced that small Samaritan, "I am going up, too. Sylvia might bite your ewe lamb."

The Freak smiled gratefully.

"The Lady and the Tiger — eh?" he said. "Connie, you are a brick! Be tender with her, won't you?" he added gently. "She's scared to death at present, and no wonder!"

Connie Carmyle, with a reassuring pat upon the anxious young man's arm, turned and sped upstairs. Dicky, hands in pockets and head in

air, strolled happily back into the circle of firelight and took up his stand upon the hearthrug. Lady Adela, looking like a large volcano in the very last stages of self-suppression, sat simmering over the teacups.

The heir of the Mainwarings addressed his parents affectionately.

"Well, dear old things," he enquired, "how are we? So sorry to be late for tea, but it was an eventful and perilous journey."

The long-overdue eruption came at last.

"Dick," demanded Lady Adela explosively, "why have you brought that young person here?"

"Young per— oh, Tilly?" Dicky smiled ecstatically to himself at the very sound of Miss Welwyn's name. "Tilly? Well, I don't see what else I could have done with her, Mummie dear. I could n't leave her at the station, could I? But I must tell you about our adventures. First of all we lost Percy."

"Dick," repeated Lady Adela, "*who — is —* ?"

"Who is Percy?" asked Dicky readily. "I forgot; I have n't told you about Percy. He is her brother. A most amazing fellow: knows everything. Can explain to you in two minutes all the things you have failed to understand for years. Teach *you* something you did n't know, I should n't wonder, Mother. He is going to

introduce me to some of his friends, and put me up for his club."

"What club, my boy?" interposed Mr. Mainwaring, snatching at this gleam of light in the general murkiness.

"'The Crouch End Gladiators,' I think they're called," said Dicky. But I have n't met any of them yet."

"Where is Crouch End?" enquired Lady Adela. "And why should one have a club there?"

"It is a cycling club," explained Dicky. "You go out for spins in the country on Saturday afternoons. Topping! I'll bring them down here one day if you like! Each member is allowed to have one lady guest," he added, with a happy smile. "But to resume. We lost friend Percy at Waterloo. He went to get a bicycle ticket, or something, and was no more seen. The train started without him. Tilly was fearfully upset about it: said she thought it was n't quite proper for her to come down without a chaperon on her first visit."

"She proposes to come again, then?" said Lady Adela, with a short quavering laugh.

Dicky stopped short, and regarded his mother with unfeigned astonishment.

"Come again? I should think she was coming again! Anyhow, the poor little thing was quite distressed when we lost Perce."

"That, dear," remarked Lady Adela icily, "is what I should call straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. And now, my boy, let me beg you to tell me —"

Dicky, who was too fully occupied with the recollections of his recent journey to be aware of the physical and mental strain to which he was subjecting his revered parents, suddenly started off down a fresh alley of irrelevant reminiscence.

"Talking of camels," he said, "there is the goat."

"Bless my soul, my dear lad!" exclaimed Mr. Mainwaring. "What goat?"

Dicky was perfectly ready to explain.

"When Tilly and I got out of the train at Shotley Beauchamp station," he began, "and found that you two absent-minded old dears had forgotten to send anything to meet us —"

"But Dick, my boy," interposed the old gentleman — Lady Adela was rapidly progressing beyond the stage of articulate remonstrance — "how could your mother be expected to divine your intentions with regard to trains, or to know that you were bringing down — er — a guest?"

"I wrote and told you," said Dicky.

"When, pray?" enquired Lady Adela, finding speech again.

"The day before yesterday," said Dicky posi-

tively; "breaking the news about Tilly, and when we were coming, and —"

"We received no letter from you," replied Lady Adela.

"But I *wrote* it, Mum!" cried Dicky. "I spent three hours over it. It was the most important letter I have ever written in my life! Is it likely a man *could* forget —"

"Feel in your pockets, my boy," suggested the experienced Mr. Mainwaring.

Dicky smiled indulgently upon his resourceful parent, and pulled out the contents of his breast-pocket — a handful of old letters and a cigarette case.

"Anything to oblige you, Dad," he ran on, scanning the addresses. "But I know I posted the thing. A man does not forget on such an oc— No! you are right. I'm a liar. Here it is!"

He produced a fat envelope from the bunch, and threw it down upon the tea-table.

II

"I forgive you both," he said, smiling serenely, "for not sending to meet us. Well, to return to the goat —"

Veins began to stand out upon Lady Adela's patrician brow.

"Richard," she exclaimed, in a low and vibrant

tone — "for the last time, *who is that young woman?*"

Dicky stared down upon his afflicted parent in unaffected surprise, and then dissolved into happy laughter.

"I must tell Tilly about this," he roared. "Of course, now I come to think of it, you don't know a thing about her. You never got my letter! Fancy you two poor old creatures sitting there as good as gold and wondering why I had brought her down here at all! Oh, my sainted Mother!"

"Who *is* she?" reiterated the sainted Mother, fighting for breath.

"She is my little girl," replied Dicky proudly. "We're engaged."

"I knew it," said Lady Adela, in a hollow voice.

"And I have brought her down here to make your acquaintance, that's all!" concluded the happy lover, apparently surprised that his relationship to Miss Welwyn should ever have been a matter of doubt to any one. "We met the goat outside the station —"

Lady Adela uttered a deep groan. Mr. Mainwaring rose from his seat and advanced upon his tall son, who still leaned easily against the mantelpiece, with his feet upon the hearthrug and his head above the clouds.

"My dearest boy," he said, patting Dicky

affectionately and coaxingly upon the shoulder, "do you realise that you are our only son, and that as such we take a not unreasonable interest in your welfare? Would you mind postponing the goat for a moment and giving us a more explicit account of the young lady? I had only the merest glimpse of her just now," he concluded, doggedly avoiding his wife's eye, "but she struck me as charming — charming!"

Dicky's air of cheerful inanity fell from him like a cloak. Exultantly he took his father by the shoulders.

"Dad," he shouted, "she's the most blessed little darling that ever walked this earth! She's a princess! She's a fairy! She's a —"

The rhapsodist broke off short, and flushed red.

"Forgive me," he said, "for waffling like that, but I don't quite know what I'm doing just at present. Dad, I'm the happiest man that ever lived!"

"My boy, my boy," cried little Mr. Mainwaring, "I'm glad — I'm glad!"

And father and son, regardless of the feelings of the unfortunate lady upon the sofa, proceeded to shake one another violently and continuously by both hands.

At last they desisted, a little sheepishly.

"Abel," said a cold voice, "be seated. Dick, take that chair."

Both gentlemen complied meekly.

"I see," said Lady Adela, looking up from a rapid perusal of her son's letter, "that the girl's name is Tilly Welwyn. Tilly, I presume, is an abbreviation of Matilda?"

"I don't know," confessed Dicky. "But Tilly will," he added brightly. "She knows everything."

"I notice," continued the Counsel for the Prosecution, still skimming through the letter, "that you have known one another for a short time —"

"Seven weeks, five days, four hours, and a few odd minutes," confirmed the defendant, looking at his watch.

" — And you became engaged as recently as last Sunday." Lady Adela laid down the letter. "Where?"

"On the top of a 'bus."

"H'm!" said Mr. Mainwaring uneasily.

"A rather unusual place, was it not?" enquired Lady Adela coldly.

"Unusual," agreed Dicky readily, "but not irregular. Oh, no! Besides, Percy was there, three seats behind. Perfect dragon of a chaperon, old Perce! Yes, the proceedings were most correct, I promise you."

"I note," continued Lady Adela, taking up the letter again, "that you do not say where you made Miss Welwyn's acquaintance."

"That was on the top of another 'bus," explained Dicky, with a disarming smile.

"And was her brother," enquired Lady Adela, ominously calm, "present on *this* occasion?"

"Percy? Rather not! Otherwise I need not have interfered."

"Int—" began both Lady Adela and Mr. Mainwaring together.

"Yes," said Dicky glibly. "It was like this. The rain began to come down hard, and a rather poisonous-looking bounder sitting beside her offered her his umbrella."

"Any gentleman would have done the same, Dick," interposed Mr. Mainwaring quietly.

"Yes, Dad. But I don't think any gentleman would have insisted on paying a girl's fare for her; and I don't think any gentleman would have considered a half-share in a three-and-ninepenny brolly an excuse for putting his arm round a girl's waist," replied Dicky, with sudden passion.

"He did that?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

Dicky grinned cheerfully.

"I did a pretty bright thing," he said. "It was no business of mine, of course, and I naturally did n't want to start a brawl on the top of a Piccadilly omnibus —"

"Dick, what were you doing on the top of an omnibus at all?" demanded Lady Adela unexpectedly. "Such economies are a new feature of your character."

Dicky nodded his head sagely.

"Yes," he agreed, "that's a sound point — a sound point. What *was* I doing on the top of that omnibus at all? That's the mystery. I was extremely surprised myself. I have spent whole days since, wondering how I got there. I have come to the conclusion that it was Fate — just Fate! That's it — Fate!"

"My dear boy, don't talk nonsense," said Lady Adela impatiently.

"But I am quite serious, dear Mum," persisted Dicky. "I don't as a rule go following unprotected young females onto the summits of omnibuses —"

Lady Adela's fine eyes began to protrude, crabwise.

"You *followed* her?" she gasped.

"I did. What else was there to do?" said Dicky simply. "I might never have seen her again if I had n't. Fate does n't as a rule give a man two chances. I got this one, and I took it. One moment I was walking along Piccadilly, bucking about something to old Tiny Carmyle. Next moment there she was, stepping on to that Piccadilly 'bus. In about five seconds I found

myself up on top, too, sitting on the seat behind her. I tell you, it must —"

"What became of Mr. Carmyle?" asked Lady Adela, ruthlessly interrupting another rhapsody.

Dicky smiled vaguely, and rubbed his head.

"Upon my soul, I don't know," he confessed. "It's the first time the matter has occurred to me. I expect he went home. He's a resourceful old creature."

"How did you dispose of the man with the umbrella, my boy?" enquired Mr. Mainwaring.

"Ah," said Dicky, abandoning Carmyle to his fate, "that was where I did the bright thing. The fellow looked as if he made rather a hobby of this sort of game, and that gave me an idea. When he started amusing himself, I tapped him on the shoulder and said, right in his ear: 'Look here, my man, do you remember what happened to you the last time you were rude to a lady when you thought no one was with her?'"

Mr. Mainwaring rubbed his hands gently.

"Well?" he said.

"At that," continued The Freak with relish, "my sportsman went a sort of ripe gorgonzola colour, grabbed his filthy brolly, and slid heavily down the back stairs of the 'bus."

"And what did you do then," enquired Lady Adela.

"I," replied Dicky triumphantly, "got up and took his seat and gave Tilly *my* umbrella!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" crowed Mr. Mainwaring delightedly. "H'm! h'm! h'm! Honk! honk! honk!" he concluded hurriedly, coughing laboriously and patting himself upon the chest, as his consort turned menacingly in his direction.

"And where did you part company?" asked Lady Adela.

"Well," explained the culprit, "I offered to see her home. She was rather shaken up by what had happened."

Lady Adela nodded her head as if she had expected this.

"I see. And what did the young woman —"

"Don't you think, Mum dear, that you might start calling her 'lady' now?" suggested Dicky gently.

"—Say to that?" she enquired, without taking the slightest notice of the interruption.

"She said she was n't going home. She was out shopping, it seemed. In fact, she got down at a shop in Oxford Street. I insisted on her keeping the umbrella, though."

"As a gift?"

"No," said Dicky with a twinkle; "as a hostage."

"And you gave her your address?"

Dicky's radiant countenance clouded for a moment.

"Not quite," he said. "I meant to, of course; but I can't have been quite my own calm self; for instead of giving her my own address, I asked for hers."

"She gave it, I suppose?" said Lady Adela dryly.

"No. She hesitated badly. I ought to have realised at once that I was not quite playing the game; but I was so mad keen to see her again that the idea never occurred to me. I simply thought she had forgotten where she lived, or something, and waited."

"But finally," said Lady Adela, "the young — lady did confide her address to you?"

Dicky nodded, and his mother continued: —

"Where does she live?"

"Russell Square," said Dicky rapturously.

"Russell Square? Ah! I know it. One drives through it on the way to Euston. In Bloomsbury, I believe?" said Lady Adela.

Her infatuated son corrected her. "Not Bloomsbury," he said reverently; "Heaven."

"Quite so," agreed Lady Adela, entirely unmoved. "What number?"

"I have forgotten the number long ago," replied Dicky, "but I could find my way to the place blindfold by this time."

"Don't you ever write to her?" asked his mother curiously.

"Every day."

"Then you must know her postal address," was the crushing rejoinder.

Dicky merely shook his head, and smiled serenely.

"No, I don't," he said.

"Then where do you address her letters?"

"I walk round every night after bedtime, and drop the letter into her letter-box. Is it likely I would let a postman touch it? Anyhow, on this occasion Tilly told me that if I asked for my umbrella any time I was passing it would be handed out to me. Then she thanked me again, the darling, and went into the shop."

"Front entrance?" enquired Lady Adela swiftly.

"Was it?" said Dicky vaguely. "I don't remember. Yes, I do. She went round and in at the side somewhere. Why?"

"Nothing," said Lady Adela. "And did you call at Russell Square?"

"Rather! I went there next afternoon."

"Were you invited in?"

"As a matter of fact, I met her coming out, with her father. A splendid old chap! Apparently Tilly had told him the whole tale, and he had expressed a desire to make my acquaintance.

A lucky desire for me, what? He took us both out to tea."

"Where?"

"Gunter's. Said he was sorry he could n't ask me into the house at present, as they had the paperhangers in. After that visitation was over, I was to come and make the acquaintance of the rest of the family."

"And did you?"

"Yes."

"What is the house like inside?" was the next inevitable feminine enquiry.

"To tell you the truth I have n't been inside yet, except the front hall. But I met the rest of the family at a very friendly little luncheon given in my honour at the Criterion on the following Saturday afternoon."

"And what are the rest of the family like?"

Dicky pondered.

"Now I come to think it over," he confessed at length, "I'm not very clear about the rest of the family. Collectively they struck me as being the most charming people I had ever met, but I don't seem to have noticed them individually, if you know what I mean. You see, Tilly was there."

"How many are there?" pursued his mother, with exemplary patience.

"Four or five, I should think, but I have never

counted them," replied the exasperating Richard. "Tilly —"

Mr. Mainwaring came timidly to his wife's aid.

"Is there a mother, my boy?" he asked.

"Yes, there is a mother," replied Dicky hastily. "Oh, yes," he repeated with more confidence, "certainly there is a mother."

"Any sisters?"

"There is a small girl — a dear. And I have a kind of notion there are some twins somewhere. Tilly —"

"Any brothers?"

Dicky smiled, apparently at some amusing thought.

"Yes," he said, "there is Percy. A sterling fellow, Perce! I wonder where he is, by the way. If he were here he might be able to do something with the goat. Any one would respect Percy — even a goat."

Lady Adela sighed despairingly. Mr. Mainwaring, taking the goat by the horns, so to speak, asked his son to elucidate the mystery once and for all.

"Did n't I tell you about the goat?" asked Dick in surprise. "Well, it was like this. When Tilly and I were hunting for a cab in the rain at the station just now, we met a woman with a goat, in tears."

"The goat?" said Lady Adela incredulously.

"No, its mother — I mean, its proprietress. She had missed the market, or something, owing to her pony breaking down, and she had come to the station as a forlorn hope, to see if she could catch a departing goat-merchant and unload Maximilian on him."

"Maximilian?" interjected Lady Adela giddily.

"Yes — the goat. We had to call him *something*, you know. Her husband was very ill in bed, and Maximilian had to be sold to defray expenses, it seemed."

"And so you — er — purchased Maximilian?" said Mr. Mainwaring.

"We did," replied The Freak gravely. "That was why we had to walk. The cabman would not allow us to take Maximilian inside with us, and Max absolutely declined to sit on the box beside the cabman — which did n't altogether surprise me — so we all three had to come here on our arched insteps. I wonder where Tilly is."

"Where is the animal now?" enquired Lady Adela apprehensively. She was quite prepared to hear that Maximilian was already in the best bedroom.

"We left him on the lawn, tethered to the rain-gauge," replied Dicky. "Ah, there she is!"

Forgetting the goat and all other impediments

to the course of true love, he hurried to the foot of the staircase.

III

Miss Welwyn and Mrs. Carmyle descended the stairs together, Sylvia stalking majestically in the rear. Tilly wore a short navy-blue skirt and a soft silk shirt belonging to Connie — garments which, owing to the mysterious readiness with which the female form accommodates itself to the wardrobe of its neighbour, fitted her to perfection. In this case, however, the miracle was less noticeable than usual, for the two girls were of much the same height and build, their chief points of difference being their hair and eyes.

In reply to her swain's tender enquiries, Miss Welwyn intimated that she was now warm and dry.

"In that case," replied Dicky, "come and sit up to the tea-table and take some nourishment."

On her way to her tea Tilly was met by Mr. Mainwaring senior, with outstretched hands.

"My dear young lady," he said, with shy cordiality, "we owe you a most humble apology."

Tilly, flushing prettily, asked why.

"For our extremely vague greeting to you just now," explained her host. "You see" — he clapped Dicky fondly on the shoulder — "this

intellectual son of ours forgot to post the letter announcing your — telling us about you. We have only just heard the news. Now that we have you, my dear" — the old gentleman's eyes beamed affectionately — "we are going to make much of you!"

"Oh, thank you! You *are* kind!" cried Tilly impulsively; and smiled gratefully upon her future father-in-law. His were the first official words of welcome that she had received.

"Good old Dad!" said Dicky.

Meanwhile Lady Adela had come to the conclusion that her male belongings were overdoing it.

"Do you take sugar, Miss Welwyn?" she enquired loudly.

"Yes, please," said Tilly, still engaged in smiling affectionately upon the Mainwarings, *père et fils*.

"I wonder now," continued Mr. Mainwaring, "if you are in any way related to an old friend of mine — or perhaps I should say acquaintance, for he moved on a higher plane than I — Lucius Welwyn? I was at school with him more than forty years ago, and also at Cambridge."

"Lucius Welwyn?" cried Tilly, her eyes glowing. "He is my Daddy — my father!"

"You don't say so? Capital!" Abel Mainwaring turned to his wife. "Adela, do you hear

that? Miss Welwyn and I have established a bond of union already. Her father was actually at school with me."

Lady Adela flatly declined to join in the general enthusiasm.

"Are you sure, dear?" was all she said. "There might be two."

Mr. Mainwaring pointed out, with truth, that Lucius Welwyn was an uncommon name. "But we can easily make sure," he said. "The Lucius Welwyn whom I remember was a Fellow of his College. Did your father —"

"Yes, Dad was a Fellow of his College for some years," said Tilly. "I think I will come a little farther from the fire now, if you don't mind. I am quite warm."

"Come and sit here by me, dear Miss Welwyn," said Lady Adela with sudden affability. "I want to have a cosy little chat with you. Dick, you are very wet and muddy. Go and change."

"All right," said Dicky obediently.

As he left the hall he said something in a low voice to Mrs. Carmyle. That small champion of the oppressed nodded comprehendingly, and established herself at a writing-table under the curtained window.

"Abel," enquired Lady Adela, in pursuance of her policy of once more clearing the decks for action, "what have you done with Mr. Rylands?"

"I quite forgot him," confessed Mr. Mainwaring. "I was so much occupied with Miss Welwyn. I fear he is still in the smoking-room."

"Go and let him out — by the side door," commanded Lady Adela.

"Come on, Dad!" said Dicky.

Father and son disappeared, arm-in-arm; Lady Adela and Sylvia closed in upon the flinching Miss Welwyn; and Mrs. Carmyle, taking up her pen, addressed herself to the composition of an epistle to her lord and master.

Lady Adela looked round, and remarked in solicitous tones: —

"Constance, dear, you have chosen a very draughty corner for yourself."

"I have put fresh note-paper in your bedroom, Connie," added Sylvia cordially.

"I'm as right as rain, thanks," said Connie. "Just scribbling a line to Bill."

And she began: —

I have arrived quite safely, old man, and the most tremendously exciting things are happening here. Listen!

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER COSY CHAT, WITH AN INTERRUPTION

I

The victim, continued Connie presently, *is now upon the sofa, wedged in between the Chief Ogress and the Assistant Tormentor. She is scared out of her wits, poor thing, but has stood up to the pair of them splendidly so far.*

"It was good of you to come down to this poky little corner of the country, Miss Welwyn," Lady Adela was saying, handing Tilly a second cup of tea. "It is so nice when one's friends take one as they find one, is it not?"

Tilly, wide-eyed and quaking, was understood to assent to this proposition.

"You live in town, I understand?" continued Lady Adela cautiously.

Tilly took a deep breath, and began: —

"Yes — in Russell Square. The house," she continued rapidly, "is very old-fashioned. It belonged to my grandfather. My father inherited from him, and we have lived there ever since we left Cambridge. We have often talked of leaving, but Dad says he can't bear transplanting at his time of life. So," concluded Tilly, with an

hysterical little gasp — Lady Adela and Sylvia were listening with the dispassionate immobility of a pair of well-nourished sphinxes — "we just stay on."

She has confessed that she lives in Bloomsbury, wrote Mrs. Carmyle. *The Inquisition are one up.*

"Russell Square!" cooed Lady Adela. "How charming and old-fashioned! So handy for the British Museum, too!"

"And Euston Road!" added Sylvia enthusiastically.

Cats! Cats!! Cats!!! recorded Connie furiously.

Lady Adela offered Tilly a bun, and resumed her long-distance fire.

"You are quite a small family, I imagine?"

"Well," began Tilly readily — they had reached a topic that lay very near her heart — "there are Father and Mother, of course, and my brother Percy, and my sister, and two quite tiny ones. My grandmother —"

"How nice," murmured Lady Adela indulgently, closing her eyes as if to mitigate the strain of this enumeration. "And what is your little sister's name?"

"Amelia."

"Amelia? Delightful! Perfect! It suits Russell Square exactly."

"One feels," corroborated Sylvia, "as if the

Sedleys and the Osbornes and the Rawdon Crawleys all lived next door."

Why don't they smack people like Sylvia more in their youth? enquired Mrs. Carmyle's letter plaintively.

"I don't think we have met any of *them*," said Miss Welwyn doubtfully. "The Mossops live on one side of us and the Rosenbaums on the other. We don't call on them, of course," she added apprehensively. "And oh, Lady Adela, I have an invitation for you from my mother, to come and have tea with us."

"That is very kind of your mother," said Lady Adela graciously. "You shall give me the invitation when you have unpacked your boxes."

"It's — it's not a written invitation," said Tilly. "Mother just asked me to ask you, any day you happen to be coming into town. Then you would meet my father and the others."

"That will be charming," replied Lady Adela. "I think we have no engagement on Monday." (*Lady A. is simply bursting with curiosity about the girl's family*, observed Connie at this point.) "I will write a little note to your mother, and you shall take it back with you on Monday morning. Are you the eldest of the family?"

"No. Perce — Percy is the eldest. He is twenty-two."

"Is he at the University?"

Miss Welwyn shook her head.

"Not now," she said. She spoke with more freedom. The restraint of her surroundings was wearing off, and her courage, which was considerable, was beginning to assert itself. "He is in the City. He dislikes it very much, poor boy. He is so fond of open-air sports, and he finds an office very trying. My father was a great sportsman, too. He used to go racing a good deal at one time, but he has given it up now. He says he is on the shelf."

"And he was a Fellow of his College, I think you said?" remarked Lady Adela, a little bored with this prattle.

"Yes — Fellow and Tutor."

"But he is no longer in residence, you say?"

"No," said Tilly briefly.

There is something shady about the poor child's father, wrote Mrs. Carmyle, *but Lady A. has got no change out of her so far.*

"I am looking forward greatly to making your father's acquaintance, Miss Welwyn," said Lady Adela, with absolute sincerity. "Now, I wonder if I know any of your mother's people. I don't think you have mentioned her maiden name."

"She was a Banks," replied Miss Welwyn readily.

Bill, dear, this little girl is splendid! recorded Connie enthusiastically.

"I beg your pardon?" said Lady Adela.

"A Banks," repeated Tilly politely.

Lady Adela nodded her head intelligently.

"Ah, to be sure!" she said. "Let me see. Are they a Warwickshire family, now?"

"Or is it a Cornish name?" queried Sylvia, with an encouraging smile.

"No," said Tilly. "Mother came from Bedfordshire — or else Cambridgeshire," she added rather breathlessly, for the four eyes of the sphinxes were upon her once more.

"But, dear Miss Welwyn —" began Sylvia.

I can stand this no longer! scribbled Connie, and threw down her pen.

"Thank goodness, that's over!" she exclaimed, rising and coming over to the fire. "What a nuisance affectionate husbands are! Talking of husbands, Sylvia, I hear you are going to marry a plumber."

Lady Adela and Sylvia, taken in flank, both turned and eyed the frivolous interloper severely. Had they not done so, they would have noted that Miss Welwyn's teacup had almost leaped from its saucer.

"Dear Connie, you are priceless," commented Sylvia patronisingly. "I wonder where you got your quaint sense of humour."

"Lady Adela was my informant," said Connie, quite unruffled. She had drawn the enemy's fire

upon herself, which was precisely what she had intended to do. "Jolly sensible of you, too! A plumber is a useful little thing to have about a house. My Bill is practically one, you know, although he calls himself something grander. Now, what about a four-handed game of billiards before dinner? Do you feel inclined to play, Miss Welwyn?"

"I am rather out of practice," said Tilly dubiously.

"Never mind!" said Connie. "You can play with Dicky against Mr. Mainwaring and me."

She walked to the foot of the staircase, and called up: "Mr. Richard, forward!"

"In one moment, Miss!" replied a voice far up the height. "I'm just attending to a lady at the ribbon counter. I'll step down directly." Then a stentorian bawl: "Sign, please!"

During this characteristic exchange of inanities an electric bell purred faintly in the distance, with the usual result that the dining-room door opened, to emit the jinnee-like presence of Mr. Milroy.

"What is it, Milroy?" enquired Lady Adela.

"Front door bell, my lady," replied Milroy, and disappeared like a corpulent wraith through the curtains.

"Heavens, not *another* caller!" exclaimed the overwrought mistress of the household.

"Probably Mr. Rylands come back for his goloshes," said Sylvia. At the same moment Dicky and his father appeared, descending the staircase together.

"*And* the next article, madam?" continued Dick lustily, addressing Mrs. Carmyle, who stood below.

He was answered, not by the lady to whom his query was addressed, but by Milroy, who appeared holding back one of the curtains which covered the entrance to the vestibule, to announce, in the resigned tones of a man for whom life holds no further surprises: —

"Mr. Percy Welwyn!"

II

Mr. Percy Welwyn entered. He was a slender young man with an insufficient chin and a small moustache. He looked like a shop assistant; and Dicky's last remark, still ringing through the hall, emphasised rather than suggested the comparison. His hair was brushed low down upon his forehead, with an elaborate curl over his right eyebrow. His eyes were bulgy. He wore a tight-fitting cycling suit, splashed with mud, and carried in his hand a small tweed cap bearing a metal badge. Altogether an impartial observer might have been excused for not feeling greatly surprised that Dicky and Tilly had mislaid him.

Mr. Welwyn advanced to the fire, with the easy grace of one who is habitually a success in whatever grade of society he finds himself, and remarked: "Good-evenin', all!"

For a moment there was a frozen silence. Then Dicky hurried forward.

"My dear Percy," he exclaimed, wringing the newcomer by the hand, "here you are, after all! Dear old soul! Let me present the rest of my family."

He linked his arm in that of the travel-stained cyclist, and led him towards the petrified Lady Adela.

"Mother," he announced, "this is my friend Percy Welwyn."

"*Mr.* Percy Welwyn," said a gentle voice in his ear.

"Sorry, old man!" said Dicky hastily.

"No offence taken," Mr. Welwyn assured him, "where none intended. This, I presume," — he waved his dripping tweed cap in the face of the speechless matron before him, — "is your hostess."

"Yes," said Dicky. "My mother, Lady Adela Mainwaring."

Mr. Welwyn shook hands affably.

"How de do, your ladyship?" he said. "Very pleased to make your ladyship's acquaintance, I'm sure."

"And this," continued Dicky, swiftly wheeling his guest out of the danger zone, "is my old Dad."

"How do you do, Mr. Welwyn?" said Mr. Mainwaring, with a courteous little bow. "We make you welcome."

"How de do, your lordship?" replied Mr. Welwyn, repeating his hand-shaking performance. "Very pleased to make your lordship's acquaintance."

"That's an error on your part, Percy," said Dicky smoothly. "Dad's only a commoner. But we'll work it out afterwards. This is my little sister Sylvia."

Mr. Welwyn greeted the statuesque Miss Mainwaring as he had greeted her parents, throwing in an ingratiating ogle which plainly intimated that he intended to make an impression in this quarter.

"Very pleased to make *your* acquaintance, Miss," he said. "We shall be calling each other Perce and Sylvie in no time, I can see. And now," he continued, turning his back upon the quivering figure of his future playmate, "I should like to address a few observations to the happy couple. You're a nice pair of turtle-doves to come and play gooseberry to, I *don't* suppose! Here I give up a whole Saturday afternoon to come and chaperon our Tilly and her young gentleman

down to his ancestral home; and the first thing I know is the pair of them give me the slip at Waterloo! Chronic, I call it!"

"What else did you expect, Mr. Welwyn?" interposed Connie, coming characteristically to the rescue, the majority of the Mainwaring family being in no condition to cope with Percy. "Have n't you ever been engaged yourself?"

Her unsolicited intrusion into the conversation was plainly a shock to Percy's sense of decorum. He coughed reprovingly behind his hand, and turning to Dicky, remarked:—

"Introdooce me!"

Dicky, humble and apologetic, complied. Mr. Welwyn went through his usual performance, and continued:—

"Engaged, Mrs. Carmyle? Not me! Not that I might n't have bin, mark you, if I had n't been born careful. Be born careful, and you need n't be born lucky. The Proverbs of Perce — Number one!" he added, in a humorous aside. "Well, to resume. Luckily I had the old push-bike with me, and I managed to find my way down here in a matter of an hour and a half or so. And then what happens? Just as I am doing a final spin up your kerridge-drive, your ladyship — *bing! bang!* and I get bowled over in the dark by a charging rhinoceros!"

Mr. Welwyn concluded this dramatic narrative with a few appropriate gestures, and paused to note its effect upon his auditors.

"That was Maximilian, I fancy," explained Dicky cheerfully. "The little fellow must have got loose. Did you notice which way he was going?"

"I did," replied Percy with feeling. "He was going the opposite way to me."

"In that case," replied Dicky reflectively, "he must be halfway back to mother by this time. Well, perhaps it is just as well. Did you happen to observe whether he had the rain-gauge with him?"

"All I remarked," replied Mr. Welwyn bitterly, "was about half a mudguard. But that," he continued, with a winning smile to the ladies, "is neither here nor there, is it? Seeing as you are safe, Tilly, old girl, I think I may now resign the post of chaperon into her ladyship's hands. And perhaps," he added with a graceful bow, "I may be permitted to remark that in my humble opinion a more capable pair of hands could not be found for the job."

Lady Adela had suffered severely that day, and her spirit for the time being was almost broken. She merely smiled weakly.

Mr. Welwyn, now at the very top of his form, struck an attitude.

"My trusty iron steed," he declaimed, "waits without the battlements — all but a few spokes, that is, accounted for by the aforesaid rhinoceros — and I must hence, to ketch the seven-fifteen back to Londinium."

"Does that mean he is going?" murmured Lady Adela to her daughter, with a flutter of hope upon her drawn features.

Sylvia was nodding reassuringly, when the tactless Dicky broke in:—

"Percy, old son, you really must stay for dinner, if not for the night."

"We can't send you away empty in weather like this, Mr. Welwyn," added Mr. Mainwaring hospitably. "My dear —"

He turned to his wife, but the words froze upon his lips, for Lady Adela presented an appearance that can only be described as terrible. But the impervious Percy noticed nothing.

"By my halidom," he exclaimed, highly gratified, "that was well spoken! Yet it cannot be. I thank you, ladies and gentles all, for your courtly hospitality; but, as the bard observes: 'I *must* get home to-night!'" (Here he broke into song, and indulged in what are known in theatrical circles as "a few steps.") "The club has an important run billed for to-morrow, and if little Percy is missing, there will be enquiries. Still, rather than disoblige, I'll split the differ-

ence. I will drain a stirrup-cup of foaming Bass with ye ere I depart. Then, forward across the drawbridge! Yoicks! Likewise Tally Ho! Which way, fair sir," concluded this high-spirited youth, turning to his host, "to the Saloon Bar?"

"Percy," remarked Dicky hurriedly, "you are immense! You ought to go on the Halls. Come along! This way!"

"I *have* bin approached, mind you," began the comedian, taking Dicky's arm, "but!"

"Are you coming too, Tilly?" asked Dicky, looking back.

Tilly, who had been apprehensively regarding the flinty countenances of her future relatives-in-law, assented hurriedly and gratefully.

"Yes, please," she said. "I will come and see Percy off."

She took Dicky's free arm.

"'T is meet and fitting," observed the ebullient Percy. "We will drain a tankard jointly. Right away! Pip, pip! Good-morrow, knights and ladies all!"

The trio disappeared into the dining-room, leaving a most uncanny silence behind them!

Mr. Mainwaring hastily picked up the evening paper and enshrouded himself in its folds. Lady Adela feebly signalled to Sylvia for the smelling-salts.

"A perfectly *appalling* young man!" she announced.

"And a perfectly sweet little girl!" quoth loyal Connie.

CHAPTER XV

A DAY OF CALM REFLECTION

I

At half-past eight next morning Connie Carmyle, wearing a tweed coat and skirt and neat brown brogues, came whistling downstairs, intent upon a constitutional before breakfast.

Upon the sofa in front of the hall-fire, self-consciously perusing a Sunday newspaper, sat a large man of slightly sheepish appearance. At the sight of Connie he rose guiltily to his feet. Mrs. Carmyle embraced him in a motherly fashion.

"And may I ask what you are doing here, my man?" she enquired.

"Finished things off last night after all," replied her husband; "so thought I might as well run down this morning and spend the day."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Carmyle wonderingly. She knew perfectly well; but being a woman and the possessor of an undemonstrative husband, it pleased her to spur him into making an exhibition of himself.

"Thought I should like a rest," said Mr. Carmyle gruffly. "Had a pretty tough week,"

he added, in a pusillanimous attempt to excite compassion.

"Is that the only reason?" persisted his heartless spouse.

"Having a wife, thought I might as well come and see her for an hour or two," conceded Carmyle grudgingly.

"You must put it better than that, darling," said Connie inexorably. "Now, be a little man! You came because — because —"

The sorely-harrassed husband, driven into a corner, turned a deep plum-colour.

"Because I love you!" he growled. "Now chuck it, Connie, for goodness' sake!"

He was rewarded by a radiant smile.

"That is much better," said Connie approvingly. "Now you shall have some breakfast. After that I have a great deal for you to do."

"What?"

"You can take us for a drive in the car."

"Us?"

"Yes — us. Me, Dicky, and his fiancée," answered Connie very distinctly.

"Righto!" replied this maddening man unconcernedly.

Connie heaved a patient little sigh, and repeated: —

"Me, Dicky, and — his fiancée."

This effort was more successful.

"Righto!" said Carmyle once more. "Freak engaged again?" he added as an afterthought.

Connie cast up her eyes in a piteous fashion, as if to imply that it is better to have a husband like this than none at all, and replied resignedly: —

"Yes. It's a long story. I wrote you a letter about it last night. Here it is in the post-basket. Read it now, while I run and break the news of your visitation to Lady Adela."

By the time that Connie returned, her taciturn but capable husband had mastered the contents of her letter — parentheses, italics, notes of exclamation, and all — and was ready to receive the orders of the day.

"Now, listen," commanded Connie swiftly. "At breakfast you will invite Dicky and Tilly to come for a run in the motor. I don't know anything about that girl, but I had a long talk with her last night when we were getting ready for bed, and she is the right sort. She seemed to like me, too. What did you say?"

"Nothing," replied the exasperating William. "Go on."

"Anyhow," continued Connie, ignoring a mysterious chuckle, "I am not going to have her pumped and bullied by Lady Adela and Sylvia before she has found her feet. Therefore we will take her and Dicky away for the day. Get your

invitation off at breakfast, before Lady Adela begins organising a party for church. The young couple can have the back seat to themselves, and I will come in front with you."

"Anything you like," replied Carmyle cheerfully. He had been looking forward to an indolent morning with Connie in the smoking-room, for he really had had a hard week; but he never questioned the dispositions of the small goddess who controlled his movements. Whatever she ordained was right.

"Thank you, Bill darling! I love you very much."

Mrs. Carmyle stood upon tiptoe, and with an affectionate sigh endeavoured to lay her head upon her husband's left shoulder. Mr. Carmyle gave her no assistance. He merely removed his sovereign-purse with some ostentation from his left-hand waistcoat-pocket to his right.

II

"This is the first time that you and I have been out in a motor together, Tilly," remarked Dicky a few hours later, taking advantage of a jolt on the part of the car to annihilate a portion of the space which separated him from his beloved.

Tilly, availing herself of a margin which instinct and experience had taught her to provide

for such contingencies as this, moved a corresponding number of inches farther away, and pointed out that they had enjoyed a motor-ride together only three days previously.

"On a motor-'bus," she explained.

"Motor-'bus? Not a bit. Fairy coach!" declared her highly imaginative swain.

"Fairy coaches don't as a rule carry eighteen inside and twenty-two outside, dear," replied the matter-of-fact Miss Welwyn.

"No, you are right," admitted Dicky. "Fairy coaches are invariably two-seaters. This one is n't a bad substitute, though — what?"

He lolled luxuriously, and turned to survey the profile beside him. Tilly was wearing a saxe-blue *suède* hat, secured to her head by a filmy motor-veil — both the property of the open-handed Mrs. Carmyle, who was sitting in front driving the car under the complacent contemplation of her husband. The fur rug which Tilly shared with Dicky enveloped her to the chin: her cheeks glowed; her lips were parted in a smile of utter content; and her eyes were closed. Dicky tried to count the long lashes that swept her cheek. She was his! His — to keep, to cherish, to protect, to pamper, to spoil! Something very tremendous stirred within him — something that had never found a place in that receptive and elastic organ, his heart, before. All the dormant

tenderness and chivalry of his nature seemed to heap itself up into a mighty tidal wave, topple over, and inundate his very soul. Foolish tears came into his eyes. Very reverently he reached for Tilly's hand under the rug. She surrendered it, smiling lazily, without raising her lashes. Dicky wondered what she was thinking about.

Tilly, on her part, was trying to summon up courage to tell him.

By this time the car had cleared the village of Shotley Beauchamp, filled with parties of worshippers hastening in what Connie described as "rival directions," and was spinning along the open road bound for the Surrey hills. It was a crisp and sunny morning. There was a touch of spring in the air, quickening the pulse.

"I wonder," began Dicky, whose conversation at this period, like that of all healthy young men in a similar condition, wandered round in a clearly defined and most constricted circle, "if I had not had that row with the umbrella-merchant on the top of the Piccadilly 'bus, whether you and I would ever —"

Bang!

Mr. Carmyle said something distressingly audible. Mrs. Carmyle applied the brakes; and the car, bumping uncomfortably, came to a standstill at the side of the road, under the lee of a pine wood.

"Was that your collar-stud at last, Tiny, old man?" enquired The Freak anxiously.

"Back tyre," replied Mr. Carmyle shortly, disencumbering himself of his rug.

They stepped out upon the muddy road and examined the off-hind wheel. The tyre was flat, but apparently whole.

"It is the valve," announced Carmyle, after unscrewing the dust-cap. "Blown himself clean out of bed. That means a fresh inner tube. And I lent the Stepney wheel to a broken-down car coming along this morning!"

"Bad luck!" said Dicky speciously, glancing up at the pine wood. "Can Tilly and I help?"

"No, better run away and play."

Dicky and Tilly, without further insincerities, obeyed at once.

"I fear you will besmirch yourself, comrade," said Dicky over his shoulder, as they departed.

"Bet you half-a-crown I don't even dirty my gloves," replied Carmyle.

"No: you'll take them off," replied the astute Richard.

"No, kid!" persisted Carmyle. "I undertake to get a new inner tube put into this tyre without laying a finger on it. Is it a bet?"

"Is Connie going to do it?" asked Dicky incredulously.

"She is and she is n't. She won't lay a finger

on the tyre either, though. Will you stake your half-crown like a man?"

"I suppose there is a catch about it somewhere," said The Freak resignedly. "Still, I fancy we must humour the young people, Tilly. All right, my lad."

Mr. Carmyle turned to his wife.

"Show them, Connie," he said.

His dutiful helpmeet selected a large tyre-lever, and sitting down in the midst of the King's highway upon the tool-box, in a position which combined the maximum of discomfort with the minimum of leverage, began to pick helplessly at the rim of the wheel. Occasionally she looked up and smiled pathetically.

"Will that do, Bill dear?" she enquired.

"Yes; but try and look a bit more of an idiot."

Mrs. Carmyle complied.

"Now you're overdoing it," said her stage-manager severely. "Don't loll your tongue out like a poodle's! *That 's* better. Hallo, I believe I can hear a car already! Come on, you two — into this wood!"

Next moment Tilly, beginning dimly to comprehend, was propelled over a split-rail fence by two muscular gentlemen and bustled into the fastnesses of the pine wood. The Casabianca-like Connie remained in an attitude of appealing helplessness upon the tool-box.

The pine wood ran up the side of a hill. The trio climbed a short distance, and then turned to survey the scene below them. Round the bend of the road came a car — a bulky, heavy, opulent limousine, going thirty-five miles an hour, and carrying a cargo of fur coats and diamonds.

"Rolls-Royce. Something-in-the-City going down to lunch at Brighton," commented Dicky. "That's the wrong sort, anyhow."

"Connie will be run over," cried Tilly apprehensively.

"Not she," replied the callous Carmyle.

He was right. Connie, diagnosing the character of the approaching vehicle from afar, had already stepped round to the near side of her own, escaping a shower bath of mud and possibly a compound fracture.

"Do you always get your running repairs done this way, Tiny?" enquired Dicky of Carmyle.

"As a rule. Connie loves it. Gives her a chance of talking prettily to people and smiling upon them, and all that. She thinks her smile is her strong point."

"I should be afraid," said Tilly.

"Connie is afraid of nothing on earth," said Carmyle. "Why, she —" he flushed red and broke off, realizing that he had been guilty of the solecism of paying a public tribute to his own

wife. "Here's another car coming," he said. "This looks more like what we want."

A long, lean, two-seated apparition, with a bonnet like the bow of a battleship, had swung round the bend, and was already slowing down at the spectacle of beauty in distress. It contained two goggled and recumbent figures. Presently it slid to a standstill beside the stranded car, and its occupants leaped eagerly forth.

"Metallurgique,[1] twenty-forty," announced Dicky, with technical precision.

"Undergraduates — or subalterns," added Carmyle contentedly, beginning to fill his pipe. "That's all right. You two had better go for a little walk, while I stay here and keep an eye on the breakdown gang."

He produced from his greatcoat pocket a copy of "The Sunday Times," and having spread it on the ground at the foot of a convenient tree, sat down upon it with every appearance of cheerful anticipation, already intent upon the, to him, never-palling spectacle of his wife adding further scalps to her collection.

Dicky and Tilly, nothing loath, wandered farther along the hillside, under strict injunctions not to return for twenty minutes. It was the first time that they had found themselves alone since their arrival on the previous evening, and they had long arrears of sweet counsel to make up.

"Dicky," said Tilly, suddenly breaking one of those long silences that all lovers know, "have you ever — loved any one before me?"

Most men are asked this question at some time in their lives, and few there be that have ever answered it without some mental reservation. But The Freak merely looked surprised — almost hurt.

"Loved any one *before?* I should think I had!" he replied. "Who has n't?"

"I have n't," said Tilly.

Dicky was quite prepared for this.

"I meant men — not girls," he said. "Girls are different. Not that some of them don't fall in and out of love rather easily, but they only do it as a sort of pleasant emotional exercise. The average male lover, however youthful, means business all the time. Quite right, too! It is a healthy masculine instinct for an Englishman to want to found a household of his own just as soon as he grows up. But it is this very instinct which often sends him after the wrong girl. He is full of natural affection and sentiment, and so on, and he wants some one to pour it out upon. So he picks out the first nice girl he meets, endows her in his mind with all the virtues, and tries to marry her. Usually it comes to nothing — the girl sees to that; for she is gifted by nature with a power of selection denied to men — and in any case it

is hardly likely that he will meet the right girl straight off. So he goes on seeking for his mate, this child of nature, in a groping, instinctive sort of way, until at last he finds his pearl of great price. Then he sells all that he has, which being interpreted means that he straightway forgets all about every other girl he ever knew, and loves his Pearl forever and ever. Therefore, Tilly, if ever a man comes to you and tells you that you are the only girl he ever loved, trust him not. It is not likely. It is against nature."

"A girl likes to believe it, all the same, dear," answered Tilly, voicing an age-long truth.

"I don't see why she should," argued the ingenious Dicky. "It is no compliment to be loved by a man who has had no experience. Now *I* can love and appreciate you properly, because I am able to compare you with about" — he counted upon his fingers, finally having recourse to a supplementary estimate on his waistcoat-buttons — "with about fourteen other ladies, of all ages, whom I have admired at one time and another; and can unhesitatingly place you in Class One, Division One, all by your own dear self, so far as they are concerned. Is n't that something?"

But Tilly was not quite satisfied.

"I should like to feel," she said, instinctively giving utterance to that point of view which makes a woman's love such an intensely personal

and jealously exacting thing in comparison with a man's, "that you could never have been happy with any woman in the world but me. Could you, Dicky?"

Dicky pondered.

"It depends," he said, "on what you mean by happy. Our measure of happiness, it seems to me, depends entirely on what we *have* compared with what we *want*. If I had never met you, I could never have missed you; and so I dare say I might have settled down happily enough — or what I considered happily enough — with some other girl. But that is impossible now. I have met you, you see. If I were to lose you" — Tilly caught her breath sharply — "no one else could ever take your place. Love like ours makes all substitutes tasteless and colourless, as they say in chemical laboratories. You have raised my standard of love so high that no one but yourself can ever attain to it. So," concluded the philosopher, with a smile which brought more happiness and reassurance into Tilly's heart than all the laborious logic-chopping in the world could have done, "though I don't know that I never *could* have been happy with any one but you, I can truly say this, that I never *can* be happy with any one but you. It's merely a matter of the difference between two conditional sentences, that's all."

But a girl talking with her lover is not interested in points of syntax.

"And will you go on loving me?" asked Tilly, putting a small but unerring finger upon the joint in Dicky's harness.

Dicky glanced down upon the eager, wistful face beside him, and smiled whimsically.

"Madam," he said, "your fears are groundless."

"How do you know?" enquired Madam, convinced in her heart, but anxious to be reassured.

"Because," said Dicky simply, "you love me. You have said it. Don't you see how that binds me to you? The mere fact of your love for me makes mine for you imperishable. The moment a man discovers that the woman he loves loves him in return, he is hers, body and soul. Previous to that something has held him back. Pride — reserve — caution — call it what you like — it *has* held him back. He has not let himself go *utterly*. After all, we can only give of our best once in this life, and usually some instinct inside us makes us refuse to surrender that best, however prodigal we may have been of the inferior article, until we *know* that we are going to get the best in return." Dicky was talking very earnestly now. "I have been keeping my best for you all these years, little maid, though neither of us knew it. Such as it is, you have it. That is why I *know* I can never go back on you. Besides, what man

worthy of the name could let a girl down, once she had abandoned her reserve — her beautiful woman's reserve — and confessed her great secret to him? Why, I once nearly married a girl whom I could not stand at any price, just because the little idiot gave herself away one day when we were alone together."

"Why should you have married her," asked single-minded, feminine Tilly wonderingly, "if you did n't love her?"

"It seemed so mean not to," said Dicky.

Tilly nodded her head gravely.

"Yes," she said, "I think I understand." (As a matter of fact, she did not. To her, as to most women, such a quixotic piece of folly as that to which Dicky had just confessed was incomprehensible. But she desired to please her lover.) "It was like you to do it, but I hate the girl. I expect she was a designing minx. But go on, dear. Go on convincing me. I love it. Say it over and over again."

"Say what?" enquired Dicky, who was not aware that he had been saying anything unusual.

"Pearls, and things like that," replied Tilly shyly.

"Oh!" said Dicky dubiously, "that takes a bit of doing. Wait a minute!"

Tilly obediently refrained from speech while her beloved dredged his imagination for further

metaphors. They were a curiously old-fashioned couple, these two. That uncanny blend of off-hand *camaraderie* and jealously guarded independence which constitutes a modern engagement meant nothing to them. They loved one another heart and soul, and were not in the least ashamed of saying so.

Presently Dicky took up his parable.

"Hearken, O my Daughter," he began characteristically, "to the words of the Prophet. Behold, I tell you an allegory! Do you know what riveting is?"

"No, dear. Women don't understand machinery," replied Tilly resignedly, in the tones of a young mother threatened with an exposition of the mechanism of her firstborn's clockwork engine.

"Well, a rivet," pursued the Prophet, "is a metal thing like a small mushroom. It is used for binding steel plates together, and requires two people to handle it properly. First of all the rivet is heated red-hot, and then a grimy man (called the holder-on) pops the stalk of the mushroom into a hole bored through two overlapping plates and keeps the little fellow in position with a sort of gripping-machine, while another grimy man (called the riveter) whangs his end of the stalk with a sledge-hammer. That punches the poor little rivet into the shape of a

double mushroom, and the two plates are gripped together for good and all."

Tilly nodded her head. The allegory was beginning to emerge from a cloud of incorrect technical detail.

"Now it seems to me," continued Dicky, "that love is very like that. Men are the holders-on and women the riveters. I have occupied the position of holder-on several times in my life. I fancy most men do: it is their nature to experiment. (I have also had the post of riveter thrust upon me, but we need not talk about that. One tries to forget these things as soon as possible," he added, with a little wriggle.) "But the point which I want to bring out is this — a rivet can only be used *once*. It may be slipped through various plates by its holder-on in a happy-go-lucky sort of way over and over again; but once it meets the hammer fairly, good-bye to its career as a gallivanting, peripatetic little rivet! It is spread-eagled in a moment, Tilly — fixed, secured, and settled for life. And if it is the right stuff, sound metal all through, it will never wriggle or struggle or endeavour to back upon its appointed task of holding together its two steel plates. It won't *want* to. It will endure so long as the two plates endure. Nothing can shake him, that little rivet — nothing! Poverty, sickness, misunderstanding, outside interference — noth-

ing will have any effect. That is the allegory. The wanderings of Dicky Mainwaring are over. He has flitted about long enough, poking his inquisitive little head into places that were not intended for him; and he has come to the right place at last. One neat straight crack on his impressionable little cranium, and the deed is done! The Freak's place in life is fixed at last. Mutual love has double-ended him, and he is going to hold on now for keeps."

Dicky was silent for a moment, and then continued: —

"No one but you could have dealt that stroke, Tilly, or I should have been fixed up long ago. I could never have remained engaged to Hilda Beverley, for instance. She was a fine girl, but she did not happen to be my riveter or I her holder-on — that's all. I should have dropped out of my place at the first rattle. Lucky little rivet! Some poor beggars don't get off so cheap. They pop their impulsive little heads into the first opening, and never come out again. But Providence has been good to me, Freak though I am. I have come safe through, to the spot where the Only Possible Riveter in the World was waiting for me. Here we are together at last, settled for life. Launch the ship! *Ting-a-ling!* Full speed ahead! I have spoken! What are you trembling for, little thing?"

"I was only thinking," replied Miss Welwyn shakily, "how awful it would have been if one of the other girls had been a better riveter." Then she took a deep breath as of resolution.

"Dicky," she began, "I want to talk to you about something. I think I ought to tell you—"

But as she spoke, the figure of Mr. Carmyle, heralded by unnecessary but well-intentioned symptoms of what sounded like a deep-seated affection of the lungs, appeared among the trees, and announced: —

"Off directly, you two! Connie is just having a last farewell with her mechanics. She has collected quite a bunch of them by this time."

"They have n't taken long over the job," said Dicky, in a slightly injured tone.

Carmyle, who too had once dwelt in Arcady, smiled.

"An hour and ten minutes," he said concisely.

Dicky and Tilly said no more, but meekly uprose from the fallen tree upon which they had been sitting and accompanied their host to the road.

All signs of disaster had disappeared. The punctured back tyre stood up once more, fully inflated; the tool-box had been repacked and put away; and Connie, smiling indulgently, sat waiting at the wheel. Far away in the distance could be descried two other cars, rapidly receding

from view. They contained in all five knights of the road — grotesquely attired and extremely muddy, but very perfect gentle knights after their kind — who were now endeavouring, in defiance of the laws of the land, to overtake the time lost by their recent excursion into the realms of romantic adventure; all wishing in their hearts, I dare swear, that life's highway contained a few more such halts as this.

"Connie is going to write a book one day," observed Mr. Carmyle, as they climbed into the car, "called 'Hims Who Have Helped Me.' All right behind there?"

The car set off once more.

III

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and as it was spent *à quatre* need not be described at length.

They sped home in the gathering darkness of a frosty evening. Connie, who had relinquished the wheel to her husband, with instructions to get the car home as speedily as possible — she had not forgotten her promise to go and hear Mr. Rylands's evening sermon — now shared the back seat with Tilly; and the two ladies snuggled contentedly together under the warm rug, silently contemplating the outlines of their squires against the wintry sky.

The car swung in at the lodge gates and began to run along the crackling gravel of the drive. Presently, as they rounded a bend, the lights of the house sprang into view.

"Tea — and a big fire!" murmured Connie contentedly.

To Tilly the sight of the house suggested other thoughts. Suddenly she removed her gaze from Dicky's broad back and slipped a cold hand into Connie's.

"Will they try to take him from me?" she whispered passionately.

One of Connie Carmyle's many gifts was her ability to catch an allusion without tiresome explanations. Straightway she turned and looked deep into the appealing grey eyes beside her. Her own brown ones glowed indomitably.

"If they do, dear," she answered — "fight for him."

"I will," said Tilly, setting her teeth.

The two girls gripped hands in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

AN IMPOSSIBLE FAMILY

Amelia Welwyn, grievously overweighted by a tray containing her father's breakfast, tacked unsteadily across the floor of the drawing-room at Russell Square; and, having reached the door of her parent's bedroom, proceeded to arouse the attention of its occupant by permitting the teapot to toboggan heavily into one of the panels.

"Don't come in!" said a muffled voice.

"Half-past eleven, Daddy," announced Amelia cheerily. "Your breakfast!"

"In the fender, my child," replied the voice.

Amelia obediently put over her helm, and despite a heavy list to starboard induced by a sudden shifting of ballast (in the form of the hot-water jug) ultimately weathered the sofa and deposited the breakfast tray in the fender, without throwing overboard anything of greater moment than a piece of buttered toast.

By the fireside, in a very large armchair, sat a small, alert, wizened, and querulous old lady of eighty-one.

"Cup of tea, Grannie?" said Amelia.

"What's that?" enquired Mrs. Josiah Banks — late of Bedfordshire (or Cambridgeshire).

"Will you have a cup of tea?" repeated the child in a louder voice.

"No," replied her aged relative; "I won't."

"Very well, then," said Amelia good-temperedly. "Now you two, not so much of it, if you please!"

This warning was addressed to her younger brother and sister, who, together with herself, had joined the Welwyn family at a date subsequent to that upon which we first made its acquaintance. Amelia was twelve years of age, The Caution five, and The Cure some twenty minutes younger. At present the latter young lady, in the course of a life-and-death struggle for the possession of the jettisoned piece of buttered toast, had become involved in an embrace with her brother, so involved that it seemed as if no one unfamiliar with the use of letter-locks could ever unravel them. However, the experienced Amelia succeeded; and having shaken the skirts of The Cure a little lower and pulled the knickerbockers of The Caution a little higher, dumped both combatants upon the sofa and divided the now hopelessly mangled booty between them.

"And don't let me catch you at it again," she added magisterially. "Only Monday morning,

and your pinnies no more use than nothing! Come in!"

At the sight of the figure which appeared in the doorway in response to this invitation The Caution and The Cure set up a combined howl of apprehension, only to be quelled by a dole of lump-sugar — hush-money in the most literal sense of the word — supplied by the resourceful Amelia.

"Come in, Mr. Mehta Ram! What can we do for you this morning?" she enquired maternally. "Never mind those two" — indicating the quaking infants on the sofa. "It's their consciences, that's all. You see, I always threaten to give them to you when they are naughty, and now they think that you have really come for them. It's all right," she added, turning reassuringly to the culprits. "Mr. Ram won't eat you this time."

Benevolent Mr. Mehta Ram beamed upon the chubby buccaneers through his gold spectacles.

"Believe me, Miss Amelia," he replied, "I could cherish no cannibalistic designs upon such jolly kids. Is your excellent mother within her domicile, or has she gone for a tata?" (Mr. Ram prided himself upon his knowledge of colloquial English.)

"She is out — shopping. Tell me your trouble," said businesslike Amelia.

"I came here," began the Bengalee, "to address your mother in her offeecial capacity."

"I know," said Amelia swiftly. "It was that kipper you had for breakfast. I thought it was wearing a worried look while mother was cooking it. Well, you shan't be charged for it."

Mr. Mehta Ram waved a fat and deprecating hand.

"Far be it from me," he replied, "to reflect upon the culinary ability of your excellent mother Welwyn. I came about a very different pair of shoes."

Mr. Ram then proceeded, in the curious blend of Johnsonian English and street-boy slang which constitutes the vocabulary of that all-too-precocious linguist, the Babu, with all the forensic earnestness and technical verbiage of the student who has spent the past six months grappling with the intricacies of English Law, to bring a weighty indictment against the gentleman on the second-floor back.

"In brief," he concluded, "Mr. Pumpherston has impounded my sugar-basin."

"Broken it, you mean?"

"No, Miss Amelia. He has confiscated it — pinched it, in fact. And" — Mr. Ram swept onward to his peroration, his brown face glistening with mild indignation — "although I have assured him upon my word of honour that there

will be father and mother of a row if same is not returned forthwith, he merely projects the sneer of scorn upon my humble petition."

"Oh, does he?" exclaimed Miss Amelia, with heat. "Mr. Pumpherston has been enquiring for trouble for a long while now, and this time he is going to get it. Mother" — as Mrs. Welwyn, humming a cheerful air, entered the room and began to deposit parcels upon the table, much as a mountain deposits an avalanche — "here is Mr. Ram says Mr. Pumpherston has sneaked his sugar-basin and won't give it back."

"What's that, Ducky?" enquired Mrs. Welwyn, breaking off her little tune. She was a large, still handsome, and most unsuitably attired matron of about forty-five. Her task (and be it added, her joy) in life was the support of a rather useless husband, of whom she was inordinately proud because he happened to have been born a gentleman; and all the energy and resource of her honest simple nature had been devoted to the single aim of raising her children to what she considered his level rather than permit them to remain upon her own. In the case of the girls she had been singularly successful. Percy was her failure, but fortunately she regarded him as her greatest triumph. (Providence is very merciful to mothers in this respect.) And her love had not been utterly vain, for although her taste in

dress was disastrous and her control of the letter "h" uncertain, her family were devoted to her.

"You ask Mr. Mehta Ram all about it!" replied Amelia darkly.

"The aforesaid Pumpherston," resumed Mr. Ram at once, "has threatened me with personal violence — to wit, a damn good skelp in the eyeball. I quote his *ipsissima verba.*"

"Oh, *has* he?" replied Mrs. Welwyn, with decision. "Well that puts the lid on Pumpherston, anyway. He's behind with his rent as it is; so the moment our Perce gets home to-night, up goes Perce to the second-floor back, and out goes my lord Pumpherston! I never could abide Scotchies, anyhow."

"Martha," enquired a piping but painfully distinct voice from the fireside, "what does that black 'eathen want in 'ere?"

"All right, Mother," replied Mrs. Welwyn. She turned soothingly to the Babu. "We'll put things straight for you, Mr. Ram," she said reassuringly. "You'll get justice in this country, never fear! Good-morning!"

Mr. Mehta Ram, inarticulate with gratitude, salaamed himself out of the room, to the manifest relief of The Caution and The Cure. Mrs. Welwyn followed him onto the landing.

"You'll get your sugar-basin back, double-quick!" she announced in a loud voice. "That'll

frighten Pumpherston," she observed grimly, re-entering the room and shutting the double doors behind her.

"It's a pity losing a lodger, Mother," said Amelia.

"Yes, dearie, it is," agreed Mrs. Welwyn with a sigh. "But it can't be helped. I'll tell you what, though. Run after that blackamoor and ask him if he has n't got a friend wants a room — a nice peaceable creature like himself. The Museum Reading-Room is full of them, Father says. Tell him to pick us a good one. Take the children up with you. Father will be in here for his breakfast in a minute."

As the door closed upon Amelia and her charges, Mrs. Welwyn crossed the room to her surviving parent's side.

"Well, Mother," she enquired cheerily, arranging the old lady's shawl, "how goes it to-day? World a bit wrong?"

The genial Mrs. Banks did not answer immediately. Obviously she was meditating a suitable repartee. Presently it came.

"When is that good-for-nothing 'usband of yours going to get up?" she enquired.

Mrs. Welwyn flushed red, but patted her cantankerous parent good-humouredly on the shoulder.

"That's all right, Mother," she said. "You

mind your business and I'll mind mine. Lucius sits up very late at night, working, — long after you and I have gone to bed, — so he's entitled to a good long lay in the morning."

"Pack o' nonsense!" observed Mr. Welwyn's mother-in-law. "I'd learn 'im!"

"Good-morning, good people!"

Lucius Welwyn strode into the room with all the buoyancy and cheerfulness of a successful man of forty. As a matter of fact he was a failure of fifty-nine, but he still posed to himself with fair success as a retired man of letters. His rôle was that of the philosophic onlooker, who prefers scholarly ease and detachment to the sordid strivings of a commercial age. In reality he was an idle, shiftless, slightly dissipated, but thoroughly charming humbug. He was genuinely attached to his wife, and in his more candid moments readily and bitterly acknowledged the magnitude and completeness of his debt to her. He possessed a quick smile and considerable charm of manner; and when he was attired, not as now in a dressing-gown and slippers, but in the garments of ceremony, he still looked what he undoubtedly was — a scholar and gentleman.

"Good-morning, Father. Your breakfast is all ready. Sit down, do, and take it while it's hot," Mrs. Welwyn besought him.

"Breakfast?" exclaimed Mr. Welwyn with

infectious heartiness. "Capital!" He seated himself before the tray. "A good wife and a good breakfast — some men are born lucky!"

"Some men," remarked an acid voice, "are born a deal luckier than what they deserve to be."

Mr. Welwyn, who was sitting with his back to the oracle, did not turn round.

"That you, Grandma?" he said lightly, pouring out his tea. "You are in your usual beatific frame of mind, I am glad to note."

"None of your long words with me, Lucius Welwyn!" countered his aged relative with spirit. "I never 'ad no schooling, but I knows a waster when I sees 'un."

"Kidneys? Delicious!" remarked Mr. Welwyn, lifting the dish-cover. "Martha, you spoil me."

This pronouncement received such hearty endorsement from the fireside that Mrs. Welwyn crossed the room and laid a firm hand upon her sprightly parent's palsied shoulder.

"Now then, Mother," she said briskly, "you trot across the landing to your own room. I'm going to turn this one out presently. I've lit a fire for you."

Mrs. Banks, who knew full well that behind a smiling face her daughter masked a hopelessly partisan spirit, rose to her infirm feet and de-

parted, grumbling. At the door she paused to glare malignantly upon the back of her well-connected son-in-law. But that unworthy favourite of fortune was helping himself to kidneys.

"Seems to me," remarked Mrs. Welwyn apologetically, as the door closed with a vicious snap, "that Mother got up on the wrong side of her bed this morning. You don't mind, do you, Father dear?"

"I? Not in the least," replied Mr. Welwyn with much cheerfulness. "I find your worthy mother, if anything, a tonic. You are a good soul, Martha. Sit down and have a cup of tea with me: it must be some time since you breakfasted. Take mine."

He pushed his brimming cup towards his wife.

"Oh, no, Father!" said Mrs. Welwyn, quite distressed. "I'll get one for myself."

She rose, and went to the sideboard.

"On consideration," interposed her husband, as if struck by a sudden idea, "I think — yes, I *think* — I should prefer a tumbler. I was working late last night; and possibly — I rather feel — You know what the doctor said. A man of letters — thank you, dearest. You anticipate every wish!"

The man of letters helped himself from the decanter and siphon which his prescient spouse

had already laid beside the tray, and attacked the kidneys with renewed confidence.

"Father," observed Mrs. Welwyn presently, nervously sipping her second-hand cup of tea, "there's trouble among the lodgers again."

Mr. Welwyn gave her a reproving little glance.

"I think, dearest," he said gently, "that we agreed to call them paying guests."

"That," retorted Mrs. Welwyn with sudden indignation, "is just what they're not. Pumpherston has paid nothing for three weeks, and now he is threatening to murder poor old Mehta Ram."

"In my house?" exclamed Mr. Welwyn grandly. "Impossible! This must stop. Where is Percy?"

"Percy," replied matter-of-fact Mrs. Welwyn, "is where you would expect him to be at this hour, you dear old silly — earning his living at Cratchett and Raikes's!"

"Talking of Cratchett and Raikes," said Mr. Welwyn, characteristically forgetting all about Mr. Pumpherston, "is there a letter this morning from Gandy and Cox?"

"No," said Mrs. Welwyn quickly. "Why?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Mr. Welwyn, rising to look for his cigarette-case. "They have been rather pressing over their little account lately. In fact, they have had the presumption to threaten me with distraint."

"How much was the bill, dear?" enquired Mrs. Welwyn, removing the breakfast-tray to the sideboard.

"A mere trifle," was the airy reply. "Seven pounds odd, I fancy, for a case of champagne which I had a year or two ago, when my heart was a little — you recollect? The doctor —"

"Yes, lovey," said Mrs. Welwyn. "It was an anxious time for all of us. But" — her brow puckered — "did n't you pay cash for it? I seem to remember giving you the money."

"Now you mention it," said Mr. Welwyn, lighting a cigarette, "I believe you did — ah — hand me the money. But I fear I was weak — quixotic, if you will. I gave it away." He raised a deprecating hand. "No! Please! I beg! Do not ask me more, dearest. It was one of those private disbursements for which a man with a weakness for his fellow-creatures often finds himself made liable. A little nameless charity. It will appear upon no subscription-list; no public acknowledgment will be made. But — I have my reward. Do not embarrass me, Martha, by alluding to the matter again."

Mr. Welwyn, quite affected by the memory of his own generosity, took his wife tenderly in his arms and kissed her upon the forehead. He then blew his nose violently, evidently ashamed of his

own weakness, and sat down by the fire with the newspaper.

Mrs. Welwyn knew only too well what the little nameless charity had been; but, after all, seven pounds odd was a small price to pay for the affection of such a husband as hers. She accepted the embrace gratefully, sighed, and said: —

"Very well, dearie. It's a good thing," she added inconsequently, "that the house is our own and we don't have to bother about rent. Rates are bad enough. The butcher has been a bit crusty of late; and what with Pumpherston not paying for his room and Tilly giving up her blouse-designing, I don't believe there's change for a sovereign in the house."

Mr. Welwyn arose from his armchair, finished the refreshment contained in the tumbler (which he had placed conveniently upon the mantelpiece), and smiled indulgently upon his care-worn helpmeet.

"You women, you women!" he said, shaking his handsome head in playful reproach. "No breadth of view! No sense of proportion! Martha, dearest, how often have I begged you never to judge a situation by its momentary aspect? Cultivate a sense of perspective. Step back —"

Suiting the action to the word, Mr. Welwyn trod heavily upon the fire-irons in the fender.

These resentfully retaliated, the knob of the shovel springing up and striking him a sharp rap upon the knuckles, while the tongs nipped him viciously in the ankle.

After the clatter had subsided and Mr. Welwyn had said what many a less distinguished man would have said under similar circumstances, his habitual placidity of temper returned, and he resumed his lecture where it had been interrupted.

"I was about to urge you, Martha," he continued, "to cast your mind *forward* — forward to the time when you will possess a wealthy son-in-law."

Mrs. Welwyn, who was endeavouring to remove from the sofa certain traces of its recent occupancy by the glutinous Caution and the adhesive Cure, turned suddenly and faced her husband.

"Lucius," she said gravely, "I have a feeling that there is going to be trouble over this business."

"Over what business?" enquired Mr. Welwyn.

"Over this son-in-law business," said Mrs. Welwyn doggedly. "Mr. Mainwaring —"

"Richard, dear — Richard!"

"All right — Richard! I don't think Richard will take very kindly to us when he sees us at home, and he'll have to see us here sometime, you know. Things look different in Russell Square from what they do at the Trocadero.

And if he sheers off after all — well, it'll break our Tilly's heart."

At this moment the door burst open, to admit the sisters Welwyn, locked in an affectionate embrace and dancing a two-step to a whistled accompaniment. Tilly had returned.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WORD "SWANK"

"THAT's how it goes, 'Melia," panted Tilly, whirling her partner into an armchair. "It's quite easy, really; Dicky taught me in the billiard-room on Saturday night in ten minutes. Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here I am, everybody! Hallo, Mother darling!"

Mrs. Welwyn gently parried the approaching embrace.

"Here's your father, dear," she remarked, with the least tinge of reproof in her voice.

"Hallo, Dad! I did n't see you," exclaimed Tilly, kissing her male parent excitedly.

"Welcome home, my daughter!" said Mr. Welwyn. "Now kiss your mother."

Tilly had already begun to do so, and an eager conversation followed.

"Of course, we've heard a bit from Perce," began Mrs. Welwyn at once, drawing the pins out of her daughter's hat, "and my word! you seem to have got into the very thick of it this time, and no mistake!"

"I should just think so," gabbled Tilly. "Such a place, Mother! Billiard-rooms, and garages,

and butlers, and a fire in your bedroom and a hot bottle in your bed, and a maid to put you into your clothes, and I don't know what all! And I was introduced to a lot of future relations. There was Lady Adela. She tried to patronise me, but was n't much good. Then Sylvia, the daughter. I hate her — she is a cat. And Connie Carmyle. She is no relation, but I love her. And Father Mainwaring, he is a dear. He says he was at Cambridge with you, Dad."

Mr. Welwyn put down the newspaper.

"What is that?" he enquired in a sharp voice. "Cambridge?"

"Yes. He does n't remember you at all distinctly," said Tilly, "but says he has an impression that you were the most brilliant man of your year."

"If that," remarked Mr. Welwyn, in a distinctly relieved tone, "is all that he recollects about me, I shall be pleased to meet him again."

"How is Dicky, Tilly?" enquired Amelia.

Tilly's merry face softened.

"Dicky," she said, half to herself, "is just Dicky. He brought me as far as the door, but I would n't let him come in."

"And are they all coming to tea?" enquired Mrs. Welwyn anxiously.

"Yes — the whole boiling of them, at five this afternoon — a state call!" replied Tilly. "By

the way, Mother, that was a bloomer we made about the invitation. I knew at the time we talked about it that you ought to have written a note and chanced the spelling. Her ladyship made that *quite* plain to me."

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Welwyn in distress. "What did she say?"

"She did n't say anything in particular," admitted Tilly, crinkling her brow. "Nothing one could take hold of, you know. Just—just—"

"Sort of snacks," suggested her mother sympathetically.

Tilly nodded her head.

"That's it," she said. "Anyhow, she has sent you a written reply. Here it is."

Mrs. Welwyn and Amelia breathed hard and respectfully at the sight of the large thin grey envelope, addressed by Lady Adela's own compelling hand.

"You read it, dearie," said Mrs. Welwyn.

"No; I'll tell you what," exclaimed Tilly. "We'll let little 'Melia read it. She does n't get much fun."

"Oh, Tilly!" cried Amelia gratefully.

She took the letter, opened it with an air, and began: —

"*My deah Mrs. Welwyn — haw!*"

There was great merriment at this, for in her own family circle Miss Amelia enjoyed a great

reputation as a wit and mimic. The fact that neither she nor any of her audience, save Tilly, had ever beheld Lady Adela in the flesh detracted not a whit from their enjoyment of her performance.

"*It is really too good of you,*" continued Amelia, in the high-pitched and even tones of a lady of exceptional breeding, "*to invite us all — such a crowd of us — to come to tea on Monday. As it happens, we shall be in town that day, so Mr. Mainwaring and I propose to take you at your word, and shall be charmed to come with our son and daughter at five o'clock.*"

"That'll be four cups," murmured Mrs. Welwyn abstractedly. "We can get Mehta Ram's. Go on, Ducky."

"*After our recent experience of your daughter's society —*"

Here Amelia broke off, to observe that in her opinion the last phrase sounded tabbyish.

"Never mind! Go on!" urged Mrs. Welwyn.

"*— Daughter's society, we are naturally anxious to make the acquaintance of her forbears.*"

"Her four *what?*" asked Mrs. Welwyn in a dazed voice.

Amelia carefully examined the passage, and repeated: —

"It says 'four bears' — written as one word. Does that mean you and Dad and me and Perce?"

"If her ladyship," began Mrs. Welwyn warmly, "is going to start naming names from the Zoo —"

Tilly laid a quick hand upon her mother's arm and turned in the direction of the fireplace.

"Dad," she enquired, "what does 'forbears' mean?"

A chuckling voice from behind "The Daily Mail" enlightened her.

"The laugh is on your mother, children," said Mrs. Welwyn good-temperedly. "Finish it, 'Melia."

Amelia did so. "*What weather! Sincerely yours, Adela Mainwaring.* That's all."

"Quite enough, too!" commented Mrs. Welwyn, who still had her doubts about the four bears.

"Anyway," remarked Tilly energetically, "they are coming; and we have till five o'clock to get ready for them. Hallo, Perce!"

To the company assembled entered Mr. Percy Welwyn, immaculate in frock coat, brown boots, and a rakish bowler hat.

"What oh, Sis!" he exclaimed, kissing Tilly affectionately. "Back again from the Moated Grange — eh? My dinner ready, Mother?"

"Wait a minute, Percy dear," said Tilly quickly. "I want to talk to you — all of you. Sit down, everybody. Father!"

"My daughter?"

"Come and sit here, please!"

"A round-table conference?" enquired Mr. Welwyn amiably. "Capital!"

Tilly upon her own quarter-deck was a very different being from the frightened little alien whom we saw at Shotley Beauchamp. In two minutes the Welwyn family had meekly packed themselves round the octagonal table. Tilly took the chair.

"Now, then, all of you," she began, with a suspicion of a high-strung quaver in her voice — "Father, Mother, Percy, and little 'Melia — listen to me! You know, no one better, that when I went down to Shotley Beauchamp on Saturday I meant to act perfectly square to Dicky's people — tell them who I was and what I was, and that I worked for my living and so on; and generally make sure that they did n't take me in on false pretences. Is that correct?"

"Yes — quite correct," chorused the family.

"Well," continued Tilly defiantly — "I have n't done it! I have n't said a word! There! I *could n't!* I have seen Dicky's people, and their house, and their prosperity, and the way they look at things. They're a pretty tough proposition, the Mainwarings. They are no better born than we are; but they are rich, and stupid, and conceited, and purse-proud —"

"Tilly! Tilly!" said Mrs. Welwyn, scandalised to hear the gentry so miscalled.

"Yes, they *are*, Mother!" cried the girl pas-

sionately. "You don't know what I have had to put up with this week-end, when Dicky was n't by. Why —"

"Dicky," observed Mr. Welwyn dryly, "is also a Mainwaring, Tilly."

"Dicky," replied Tilly, with feminine contempt for the laws of heredity and environment, "may be a Mainwaring, but he does n't take after the rest of the family. But never mind Dicky for a moment. What I want to say is this. In dealing with people of this kind — people who regard those who have no money as so much dirt beneath their feet — there is only one thing that pays; and that thing," she concluded with intense conviction, "is — swank, swank, swank!"

"Good old Tilly!" shouted Percy enthusiastically; and the rest of the Welwyns, quite carried away by their small despot's earnestness, beat upon the table with their fists.

"The Mainwarings swanked for my benefit, I can tell you," continued Tilly, with cheeks glowing hotly. "They laid off to me about their town house and their country house and their shooting and their hunting and their grand relations; and they did their best — especially the daughter — to make me feel like a little dressmaker who has come in for the day."

"I bet you stood up to them, Sis," said the admiring Percy.

Tilly smiled in a dreamy, reminiscent fashion.

"I did," she said. "I matched them, brag for brag. They asked who you were, Mother. I said you were a Banks — one of *the* Bankses — of Bedfordshire!"

Unseemly but sympathetic laughter greeted this announcement, and Mrs. Welwyn was made the recipient of several congratulatory thumps from her son and younger daughter.

"I was n't quite sure whether it was Bedfordshire or Cambridgeshire," continued Tilly. "Where *is* Hitchin, anyway?"

"Hertfordshire," replied Amelia, and every one laughed again. They had all things in common, the Welwyns, especially their jokes.

"Then," Tilly proceeded, "I told them a lovely fairy-tale about our old town house. Been in the family for generations, and so on."

"So it has," said Mr. Welwyn.

"And I also told them," continued the unfilial Tilly, "that Dad was a bit of an antique himself, and could n't bear to move. Has his roots in the cellar, so to speak. You don't mind, do you, dear?" she enquired eagerly.

"My child," replied Mr. Welwyn, "I feel proud to have figured as one of your assets."

"And finally," concluded Tilly, "as I began to warm up to my work a bit, I added a few things, looking as sweet as anything all the time — like

this!" (Here she treated her enraptured audience to a very creditable reproduction of Sylvia Mainwaring's languid and superior smile.) "I chatted about our billiard-room, and our old family butler, and our motor, and so on. I am afraid I lost my head a bit. I have a notion that I gave them to understand that we went yachting in the summer!"

There was more laughter, but Mrs. Welwyn added anxiously: —

"You did n't mention anything about Southend, did you, dearie?"

"Not me!" said Tilly; "though I was feeling utterly reckless by that time. For two pins I would have told them that I had been presented at Court!"

She rose to her feet.

"That is all I have to say," she announced. "I just mention these little facts to you so that when the Mainwarings come to tea this afternoon you may know what to talk about. See?"

The other members of the conference, avoiding the eager eye of the chairwoman, began to regard one another uneasily. Then Percy said: —

"Tilly, old girl, you've landed us with a bit of a shipping order, ain't you?"

Tilly nodded. "You are right," she said. "But it will only be for an afternoon. We need not invite them again."

But Percy, who was an honest youth, although he wore a dickey, hesitated.

"How about the gallant Ricardo?" he enquired. "What's his position in this glee-party? Is he with us or them?"

"Oh — Dicky?" said Tilly, with less confidence. "I have been quite square with him. I have told him everything."

"Everything?" enquired several people at once.

"A good deal, anyhow," maintained Tilly. "I have warned him that I shan't have a penny to my name; and that I have had very few of the advantages that the ordinary girl gets; and that he must take me and my people as he finds us. And he says he prefers me that way. In fact" — Tilly's thoughts flew back to Sunday's idyll in the pine wood — "he has said a good deal more than that. And if I want him and he wants me," she added eagerly, like one anxious to struggle on to less debatable ground, "what does it matter what we say or do to his silly old mother and sister? I want my Dicky!" Her eyes shone. "He loves me and I love him, and that is all there is to be said about it. Father, Mother, Percy, 'Melia" — Tilly's hands went forth appealingly — "promise that you will stand by me and see me through!"

Eight impulsive Welwyn hands closed upon Tilly's two.

"We'll see you through, Sis," said Percy reassuringly. His eye swept round the board in presidential fashion. "Those in favour?"

Four hands flew up.

"Carried unanimously!" announced Percy; while Tilly, reassured, ran round the table showering promiscuous embraces upon her relatives.

"There's the front-door bell, 'Melia," said Mrs. Welwyn, whose provident instinct never deserted her in her most exalted moments. "It may be a new lodger. Run down and see."

Amelia obeyed, and the rest of the House of Welwyn went into Committee.

"I say," remarked the far-seeing Percy; "may I enquire who is going to open the front door to our guests this afternoon?"

The Committee surveyed one another in consternation.

"None of us can't do it, that's quite plain," said Mrs. Welwyn. "they would think we had n't got a servant."

"They would be right, first time," confirmed Percy.

"The old family butler must do it," said Mr. Welwyn with a dry chuckle.

"You certainly overreached yourself in the matter of the butler, Sis," observed Percy.

"We could get the charwoman, or borrow the

girl from the Rosenbaums," suggested Mrs. Welwyn.

"But I said a *butler*, Mumsie," objected Tilly dismally.

"Oh, dear, so you did," sighed Mrs. Welwyn.

Tilly pondered.

"I know what we can do," she said. "Percy must meet them, quite casually, outside in the Square, on his way home from the City —"

"And let them in with my latch-key — eh?" cried Percy. "That's the ticket!"

Mrs. Welwyn, greatly relieved, smiled upon her fertile offspring. Mr. Welwyn coughed gently.

"The word 'swank,'" he observed, "is unfamiliar to me; but as we have decided to incorporate it in our plan of campaign, may I suggest, Percy, that you allow your guests to ring the front-door bell before overtaking them?"

"Righto, Dad," said Percy. "But why?"

"Well," continued Mr. Welwyn diffidently, "it has occurred to me that when you have ushered the party into the hall, you might call down the staircase into the basement, distinctly but not ostentatiously, to some one — James, or Thomas — you can address him by any name you please — that there is no need to come up. You see the idea?"

"Dad," declared Percy, shaking his parent

affectionately by the hand, "you are a marvel! Why, 'Melia, what's the trouble?"

Amelia, wide-eyed and frightened, was standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER XVIII

DE L'AUDACE, ET ENCORE DE L'AUDACE, ET TOUJOURS DE L'AUDACE!

"DADDY," announced Amelia in a stage whisper, "there's a man downstairs."

"What sort of man?" enquired Mr. Welwyn, rising from his seat and edging carelessly in the direction of his bedroom door.

"A rough-looking man."

"Tell him," said Mr. Welwyn with his hand on the door-handle, "that I am not at home. Percy! Quick! Keep that fellow out!"

But it was too late. A stranger stood in the midst of the House of Welwyn.

He was an elderly, undersized, seedy-looking individual, with a blue chin, a red nose, and a faded theatrical manner. In his hand he held a blue-grey slip of paper. He smiled amiably upon the shrinking figure of the master of the house.

"Don't trouble to exit on my account, sir," he remarked wheezily.

"Who are you?" stammered Mr. Welwyn. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"Name of Welwyn?" enquired the stranger briskly.

"Yes."

"Loosius?"

"Yes."

"Then," announced the stranger, proffering the blue paper, "I must arsk you for your hospitality for a short time — a mere matter o' *form*, of course — until this small account is settled. It's Gandy and Cox," he continued chattily: "seventeen-seventeen-six; and I'm put in possession until it's settled. In other words, 'ere I am, and 'ere I stays until I gets what I came for."

Depositing his frayed headgear upon the piano, the emissary of Gandy and Cox was upon the point of selecting a chair, when he became conscious of a sudden pressure upon the nape of his neck.

"Outside!" intimated Percy's voice.

"Pardon me," replied the visitor without moving, "but you touch me at your own risk. I'm put in by the law."

There was a stifled cry from Mrs. Welwyn and the girls.

"The warrant was signed and 'anded to me this morning," continued the representative of Justice, "at ten-thirty exact. It is now in the 'ands of your Pa, young ladies —"

"Law be damned! Out you go!" shouted Percy, whirling the speaker round towards the door.

"Reflect!" urged the broker's man, gently

resisting Percy's efforts to eject him by leaning back and digging his heels into the carpet. "What's the good? If you dot me one and fling me out, it merely means fourteen days without the option for assaulting a sheriff's officer in the execution of his duty, on top of the distraint. If you don't believe me," he added, clinging affectionately to the leg of the piano, which he was passing at the moment, "go and read the warrant."

"He is right, Percy," said Mr. Welwyn. "Leave him alone. A sheriff's officer!" he muttered brokenly to himself, as his son relinquished his endeavour to speed the parting guest. "And I was once Fellow and Tutor!"

"A broker's man!" wailed Mrs. Welwyn, putting an arm round each of her daughters. "And I brought you up respectable, dearies!"

"A broker's man!" echoed Tilly, "and Lady Adela coming here this afternoon!"

This was too much for that unpolished but chivalrous youth Percy. Something must be done, for Tilly's sake.

"Dad," he said desperately, laying a hand on his father's shoulder, "ain't you got no money nowhere?"

Mr. Welwyn shook his head helplessly.

"Mother?" said Percy.

"I've got about fifteen shillings," said Mrs.

Welwyn, brightening up at the prospect of action. "How much did that insect" — she indicated the minion of the law, now warming himself at the fireplace — "say it was?"

"Seventeen-seventeen-six," replied the insect, with the air of one letting off a telling repartee.

"There is n't so much money in all the world!" whispered Amelia despairingly.

"I've got six-and-threepence," said Percy, diving into his pockets.

A thought occurred to Mrs. Welwyn.

"Father," she enquired of the motionless figure on the sofa, "did n't you tell me that Gandy and Cox's bill was only a matter of seven pounds?"

"It was, it was," said Mr. Welwyn, "but — I ordered a little more, to keep them quiet."

Mrs. Welwyn, admirable woman, wasted no time in useless reproaches. Instead, she turned once more upon the broker's man.

"Now, look here," she said; "I want to ask a favour of you. We're expecting company here this afternoon. Will you go away, and come back in the evening?"

"And find the front door bolted!" replied the broker's man affably. "No, I don't *think!* I prefer to remain. I've been in this profession for some time now — ever since I abandoned *the* profession, in fact — and I know a thing or two. I'm sorry," he added, "to disoblige a lady, and

I hope you won't take offence where none was intended. Try to look on the bright side of things. I might 'ave been a auction."

Percy broke in upon these comfortable words.

"Look here," he said; "will you go away for a quid?"

"There is nothing," replied the visitor, "that I should like at this present moment better than a quid; but I'm afraid it's my duty to stay. I shan't do nobody any 'arm, beyond taking a inventory of the furniture. You'll find me quite a confidential family friend in a day or two, I should n't wonder. Oh, dear, 'ere's another of 'em coming to 'ave a go!"

He closed his eyes resignedly. Before him stood Tilly — small, slim, white to the lips, with all her world tottering on the brink of the abyss. In her hands she held a cigar-box.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Surname," replied the broker's man pedantically, "Stillbottle. Christian ditto, Samuel. Net result, Samuel Stillbottle."

"Have a cigar, Mr. Stillbottle," said Tilly, with a ghost of a smile.

Mr. Stillbottle helped himself without comment. He was a man for whom life held few surprises. "Thank you. But I won't *go*, mind you," was all he said.

Next moment Tilly motioned him to a chair

beside the table, and set the decanter and a glass beside him. "Have something to drink, Mr. Stillbottle," she said.

"I shall be pleased to do so," replied Mr. Stillbottle graciously. "Without prejudice, of course," he added, filling his glass.

By this time the others, astonished and interrogative, had gathered round Tilly.

"Tilly," burst out Percy, "what's the good? He won't go — don't you think it!"

"Young man," corroborated Mr. Stillbottle, "you are right. I won't. You've done it in one."

Tilly took an arm of Percy and another of her mother and drew both in the direction of the sofa. Her breath came fast.

"Listen," she said rapidly — "you, too, Dad! We *will* have our tea-party. We won't throw up a single item in the programme. We'll entertain the Mainwarings, and we'll show them that we know how to do things in proper style, and we'll make them all enjoy themselves — even Sylvia — and I'll get my Dicky yet!"

She paused, and surveyed her mystified audience with shining eyes.

"But, Sis," enquired the dubious Percy, indicating the fully occupied Mr. Stillbottle, "what about Rockefeller over there?"

The indomitable Tilly laughed.

"He is our old family butler!" she said simply.

CHAPTER XIX

SIDELIGHTS ON A PUBLIC CHARACTER

Mr. Samuel Stillbottle, notebook in hand, with a look of professional severity upon his pinched features, slowly circumnavigated the drawing-room, making an inventory of the furniture. He was followed, step for step, by the deeply interested Caution and Cure, who, finding the bonds of discipline unusually relaxed, owing to the preoccupation of their elders, had seized an early opportunity of escaping from the region belowstairs in which they were supposed to be enjoying their afternoon siesta, in order to pursue their acquaintance with the gentleman whom they had christened, on sight, "the funny man." They had encountered Mr. Stillbottle in the kitchen, and had conceived a liking for him at once. As appraisers of character their point of view was circumscribed and their judgment immature; but Mr. Stillbottle's performance at dinner had won their unqualified respect and admiration. They had accordingly decided to spend the rest of their lives in his company, and with that intent in view had laboriously scaled the staircase, and were now doing their best, by a series of ill-timed

demonstrations of cordiality, to obstruct their new friend in the execution of his duty.

"Chesterfield sofa — two castors loose — one-fifteen," murmured Mr. Stillbottle, plying his pencil. ("Run away, that's good children.) Me-'ogany whatnot" — he slipped his hand round behind the piece of furniture in question — "with deal back, two-ten. Armchair, with off 'ind leg cracked, twelve-and-six. (Run away, that's little dears. Run away and drown the kitten, or give the canary a shampoo; but don't stand there starin' at me like a pair of images. I don't like it, so don't do it.) Now for the 'arpsichord!"

The harassed Mr. Stillbottle began to examine the Welwyns' piano. The Cure turned to The Caution.

"Funny man!" she reiterated ecstatically.

"Yesh," assented The Caution, who suffered from a slight palatal affection. "Funny man! Lesh fight him a little bit!"

As an intimation that the approaching combat was to be of the friendliest description, he first smiled seraphically upon Mr. Stillbottle (who was looking the other way at the moment), and then dealt that gentleman a well-directed blow in the back of each knee simultaneously with his pudgy fists. Mr. Stillbottle, who, owing to his ignorance of infantile patois, was entirely unprepared for this onslaught, promptly fell head-first

into the arm-chair with the damaged hind leg, reducing its value by a further one-and-ninepence. Before he could extricate himself his enraptured admirers had conceived and partially put into execution the happy design of tickling him to death.

"Now, look 'ere," he exclaimed indignantly, when he was sufficiently recovered from the suddenness of this outrage to resume an upright position, "you must drop it! Pop off! I won't 'ave it! If I ketch 'old of either of you — if I ketch — all right, say no more about it! I believe that little girl 'as got the evil eye," he muttered weakly to himself. Mr. Stillbottle's nerves were not in good order, and The Cure had regarded him with unwinking steadfastness for something like five minutes. "Go and play over there," he urged, almost piteously, "and let me do my job. Now, where was I? Ho, yes — the pianner."

He submitted that venerable instrument to a further scrutiny.

"*Collard and Collard*," he observed. ("A very appropriate title, too, for this 'ouse!) Date, about seventy-four or five, I should say." He lifted the lid and struck a few inharmonious chords. "Not been tooned since bought. Loud pedal broke, and ivories off three keys. Mouse-'ole in the back. Say thirty-five bob, or two p— Will you *drop* it?"

Mr. Stillbottle made this request from the floor, upon which he had suddenly adopted a recumbent attitude. The Caution and the Cure, having decided to initiate their idol into what they had always considered the most consummate jest in existence, had placed a heavy footstool close behind his heels; and Mr. Stillbottle, stepping back a pace in order to view the *tout ensemble* of the piano, had carried the joke to a successful and rapturous conclusion.

Amid appreciative shrieks of merriment from the twins, their fermenting playfellow rose solemnly to his feet, and was pausing dramatically for the double purpose of recovering his breath and deciding upon an effective scheme of reprisal, when he became aware that the door was open and that the master of the house was smilingly contemplating the entertainment.

"You three appear to be having a romp," said Mr. Welwyn genially. "You are evidently a lover of children, Mr. Stillbottle!"

Fortunately for the delicate ears of The Caution and The Cure, Mr. Stillbottle was still incapable of utterance. By the time that his two admirers had been escorted to the door by their progenitor and bidden to return to their own place, his power of speech had returned; but perceiving that the time for explanation was now past, the misjudged romper decided to postpone

the refutation of the libel until some other occasion.

"Be seated, Mr. Stillbottle," said Mr. Welwyn politely.

Mr. Stillbottle selected the sofa, which it will be remembered had been marked as high as one pound fifteen.

"I hope you had a comfortable dinner," continued Mr. Welwyn.

"Thank you," replied Mr. Stillbottle briefly — "I 'ad."

Mr. Welwyn produced half-a-sovereign.

"I make a point of being punctilious over money matters," he said, handing the coin to the broker's man. "When our little — er — contract has been carried to a successful conclusion I shall be happy to hand you another."

Mr. Stillbottle pocketed the money.

"When may I expect the other?" he enquired.

"If all goes well, about six o'clock this evening."

"I see," said Mr. Stillbottle comprehendingly. "Carriages at five-forty-five — eh?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Welwyn. "You have hit off the situation to a nicety." He laughed, in high spirits. His resilient nature had entirely recovered from the humiliation of the morning. "Meanwhile" — he produced a sheet of note-

paper — "I shall be obliged if you will kindly commit these notes to memory."

Mr. Stillbottle laboriously perused the document.

"Lord love a duck!" he observed in a dazed voice — "What's this?"

"A list of — let us say, your entrances and exits this afternoon," explained Mr. Welwyn smoothly. "You understand theatrical terms, I believe."

He had struck the right chord. Mr. Stillbottle's rheumy eye lit up.

"Entrances and ex— oho! Now I begin to take you," he said. "We're agoin' to do drawing-room theatricals, are we? Kind o' benefit matinée — eh?"

"In a sense, yes," replied Mr. Welwyn. "Are you endowed with the dramatic instinct?"

"Come again!" said Mr. Stillbottle politely.

"Could you play a part, do you think?"

"Could I play a part?" repeated Mr. Stillbottle witheringly. "Could a duck swim? Why, I was *in* the profession, off and on, for a matter of fourteen years."

"In what capacity?" asked Mr. Welwyn, much interested.

"Well, I've bin a good many things," said the versatile Stillbottle, putting his feet up on the sofa. "I've bin a guest in the palace of the Dook

of Alsatia; I've bin the middle bit of the sea-serpent — what you might call the prime cut — in a ballet of fish; and I was once the second wave on the O.P. side of the storm what wrecked Sinbad the Sailor."

Mr. Welwyn smiled sympathetically. Here was another rolling stone.

"What made you abandon such a promising career, Mr. Stillbottle?" he asked.

The late prime cut of the sea-serpent shook his head gloomily.

"The old story," he said — "professional jealousy. It started with my bein' cast for the front legs of a elephant in a pantomime. That was the stage-manager's bit of spite. My usual place is the *'ind* legs — and that takes a bit of doing, I can tell you. (The 'ind legs 'as to wag the tail, you see.) If I was to tell you the number of 'ind legs I'd played, you'd be surprised," he continued, plunging into an orgy of irrelevant reminiscence. "Why, I recollect in eighty-four, at the Old Brit., 'Oxton way —"

"But what was the matter with the front legs you were speaking of?" enquired Mr. Welwyn opportunely.

"The matter," replied Mr. Stillbottle testily, "was that they was n't *'ind* legs. Not bein' used to them, I stepped in wrong way round on the first night. We got shoved on the stage somehow,

but every time we started to move I ran straight into the 'ind legs. In the end we broke the elephant's back between us. What was more, we spoiled the Principal Boy's best song. The audience was much too occupied watchin' a elephant givin' a imitation of a camel to listen to *'er*. Besides, she was sittin' on the elephant 'erself at the time, and bein' rather stout, 'ad 'er work cut out to 'old on. She got me fired next day. Said I was n't sober."

"That was a libel, of course," said Mr. Welwyn soothingly.

"In a manner of speakin'," replied Mr. Stillbottle guardedly — "yes." He took up Mr. Welwyn's sheet of note-paper again.

"What is all this?" he enquired rather querulously. "Stage directions, or cues, or what?"

"Everything," said Mr. Welwyn. "Your lines and business, in fact."

Mr. Stillbottle nodded comprehendingly, and proceeded to read aloud: —

"*When front-door bell rings, answer door and show party up, asking their names and announcing them distinctly.*"

"You can do that?"

"I'll 'ave a dash for it, anyway. Then: *Bring in tea and put it on tea-table.*"

Mr. Stillbottle's unsteady gaze wandered round the apartment until it encountered the table.

"Tea-table, left centre," he remarked to himself. "*Then, at irregular intervals, come in and make the following remarks to me:* — that's you, I suppose?"

Mr. Welwyn nodded, and Mr. Stillbottle read the paper aloud to the end. Then he slowly folded it up, and remarked, not altogether unreasonably, that he was damned. He added a respectful rider in the French tongue, to the effect that Mr. Welwyn was *très moutarde.*

"You understand," said his employer with great seriousness — he had crossed the Rubicon now, and was determined to risk nothing by imperfect rehearsal — "you must use your own discretion as to when you come in with your messages. About once every ten minutes, I should say."

"Don't you think, governor," suggested Mr. Stillbottle, almost timidly, "that that last stretcher — the one about the shover — is just a bit *too* thick? Suppose your guests start askin' to see the car — what, then? You'll be in the cart, you know!"

"It is all right," said Mr. Welwyn. "I am giving the car up, on account of recent taxation, and so on. It is in the market now, and may be sold at any moment — to-day, perhaps."

"I beg pardon," said Mr. Stillbottle humbly. "I see I can teach you nothing." Then he added,

conversationally: "Did you ever know a Captain Slingsby, by any chance?"

"No. Who was he?"

"Another of the lads, like yourself. I thought perhaps you might have been workin' with him at some time. I came acrost him once or twice. He was a pretty tough nut. His line was to dress up as a curate and get himself adopted by rich widders; but he was n't the artist you are, sir. He 'ad n't your education, I should say. Are the whole family in this, may I enquire?"

"Er — yes," replied Mr. Welwyn helplessly.

"Ah!" Mr. Stillbottle nodded his head. "I thought somehow that I had come on a happy visit to the Nut Family as soon as I got acquainted with your two youngest. Well, it's a pleasure to work with people at the top of their profession, and I'll see you through."

Mr. Welwyn thanked him, almost inaudibly.

"But when do you suppose," pursued Mr. Stillbottle, transferring his feet from the sofa to the floor, "that I shall get out of this Dramatic Academy of yours? I 'ave n't come 'ere for a *course*, you know. Are you going to touch the tea-party for the money, or let me distrain on the furniture, or what?"

"I can't tell you at present," said Mr. Welwyn; "but I will endeavour to arrange something by the evening."

"Well, let me know soon, ole sport," said Mr. Stillbottle — "that's all. I 'ave my arrangements to make, too, remember. My *word*, look at Mother!"

This interjection was occasioned by the entrance of Mrs. Welwyn and Amelia, dressed for the party. Mrs. Welwyn was arrayed in a quieter and more tasteful fashion than might have been expected. Her costume, which had been designed and constructed by her eldest daughter, would have struck an impartial critic as one which made the very best of her age and figure. Amelia wore a short white frock, with a blue sash. Her long coppery hair flowed to her waist, and her hazel eyes were aglow with excitement.

"Father dear, what do you think of the way Tilly has turned me out?" enquired Mrs. Welwyn gaily.

For the moment her troubles were behind her. For once she was suitably — and to the outward eye expensively — attired; and the knowledge of the fact had induced in her humble but feminine soul that degree of minor intoxication which the materially-minded male usually achieves, more grossly but less extravagantly, by means of a pint of champagne.

Slowly gyrating for the delectation of her husband, Mrs. Welwyn unexpectedly encountered

the unsympathetic gaze of Mr. Stillbottle. She blushed red, and ceased to revolve.

"Oh, that you?" she exclaimed, in an embarrassed voice.

"Yes, it's me — what's left of me," replied Mr. Stillbottle lugubriously. "Wearing me out, this job is."

He displayed his paper of cues.

Mrs. Welwyn regarded him severely.

"It's time you dressed yourself," she said. "I have put my son's evening clothes out for you — in the bathroom," she added pointedly. "You had better go and put them on. He is bigger than you, but you'll manage."

Mr. Stillbottle acquiesced.

"Very good," he remarked graciously. "Wardrobe mistress must be obeyed, I suppose. I'm beginning to warm up to this part. I shall surprise you all yet."

"I hope not," murmured Mr. Welwyn devoutly.

"Did you tell him about the name, Father?" prompted Amelia.

"No, I forgot," said Mr. Welwyn. "Mr. Stillbottle, I think this afternoon that we had better address you by some other name than your own."

"What," enquired Mr. Stillbottle, with a touch of hauteur, "is the matter with me own little patteronymic?"

"Just to sustain the character, you know," urged Mr. Welwyn.

Mr. Stillbottle sighed, in humorous resignation.

"All right," he said. "Confer the title."

Mr. Welwyn turned to his wife.

"What do you say to 'Howard,' Mother?" he asked.

"Nothing with an H in front of it for *me*, dearie, if you please," announced Mrs. Welwyn firmly. "I can see enough rocks of that kind ahead of me this afternoon as it is."

"Why not 'Russell'?" suggested Amelia. "Russell Square, you know."

Mrs. Welwyn stroked her resourceful little daughter's hair gratefully.

"That will do finely," she said. "You are Russell," she announced briefly to Mr. Stillbottle.

The newly christened infant acquiesced listlessly, and rose from the sofa.

"Now I must tear myself away," he said, "to don me trunks and 'ose and get up this patter. I'm a slow study. No promptin', I presume?"

"No," said Mr. Welwyn.

"Gaggin' permitted?" enquired Mr. Stillbottle, without much hope.

"Certainly not."

"Very good. So long, everybody. *Exit Russell, door in back.*"

With a theatrical gesture, the ci-devant impersonator of elephants' hind legs disappeared. The Welwyns regarded one another apprehensively.

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Welwyn.

"We must make the best of him, Martha," said her husband. "After all, we did not invite him here of our own accord: he *has* to be present in the house in some capacity. Still, I admit he is the weak spot in our enterprise — the heel of Achilles, so to speak."

But Mr. Welwyn was wrong.

CHAPTER XX

REHEARSED EFFECTS

"*H*as *H*erbert," enquired Mrs. Welwyn, taking a deep breath, "*h*urt *H*orace?" She choked. "Oh, dear!"

"Very good, Mumsie," said Amelia encouragingly. "Go on."

"But it puts me out of breath so, child, as soon as I begin to think of it," complained her pupil. "I shall never learn."

"Yes, you will," said Amelia confidently. "H's are just a matter of proper breathing, Daddy says. Now try the next sentence, and remember there's a trap in it!"

Miss Amelia seated herself upon the floor, clasping her long black legs with her arms and resting her chin on her knees.

"Now," she said, with a little nod.

Conscientious Mrs. Welwyn, having audibly recharged her lungs, now began to emit another heavily aspirated sentence.

"*H*ildebrand," she announced, "*h*as *h*it *H*enry *h*ard *h*intentionally. There, that's done it!" She sighed despairingly.

"And I warned you, Mother," said Amelia

reproachfully. "That last word is put in on purpose to trip you up."

"Yes, I know," replied her mother with an apologetic smile. "And it always does. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, ducky, and that's a fact. I have always been common in my talk, and common in my talk I always will be. All I can promise is that I will do my best this afternoon; and I hope, for all of your sakes, that your old mother won't go and disgrace you."

Little 'Melia's reply to this humble aspiration was an embrace which entirely disorganised the hooks and eyes at the back of Martha Welwyn's festal garment. While the disaster was being repaired, Tilly entered briskly. In her hand she held a printed card, bearing the legend

APARTMENTS

in staring letters. This she dropped behind the piano.

"Hook me up behind, 'Melia, will you," she said, "when you have finished Mother? No, I'll do Mother and you do me. Your hair-ribbon is wrong. Let me get hold of it."

The Welwyns, *mère et filles*, formed themselves into a voluble equilateral triangle.

"I found that 'Apartments' card lying on the hall table," said Tilly with a shiver. "I suppose

Russell took it out of the drawer when he was making his inventory. A nice thing if they had all marched in through the front door at that very moment! Still," she added cheerily, "there's no harm done. Am I all right, do you think?"

"Tilly, you look lovely," said Amelia.

"One thing about being a dress-designer," admitted Tilly, kissing her little sister, "is that you can design yourself a dress. 'Melia, you look a little duck. Mother, your hair is n't quite right. Let me pull it out a bit here."

She tweaked the coiffure of her much-enduring parent into position, whistling blithely. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes sparkled. She was determined to look her best for Dicky that day. And to do her justice, she did.

"Tilly dear," remarked Mrs. Welwyn dubiously, "can we all get round that table for tea?"

"Gracious!" cried Tilly, observing the heavily loaded table for the first time. "You are never going to plant everybody round *that*, like nursery tea?"

"Ain't we?" said Mrs. Welwyn blankly.

"Certainly not," replied Tilly.

Swiftly she sketched out the fundamentals of that meal which combines the maximum of discomfort with the minimum of nourishment — afternoon-tea as consumed by high society in the present period — and in three minutes the great

round table, tipped onto its edge, was trundled rapidly into Mr. Welwyn's bedroom, to the surprise and discomfort of Mr. Welwyn, who was dressing at the time.

"Now a small tea-table," commanded Tilly.

"There is n't such a thing in the house, love," panted her overheated parent.

"Yes, there is," said little 'Melia, the ever-ready. "In Mr. Pumpherston's room. He keeps a text framed in fir-cones on it."

"You're right, dear; I had forgotten," admitted Mrs. Welwyn. "Well, Pumpherston is going to get bounced this evening anyway, so we might as well have his table now as then. Come with me and get it. He's out."

Left alone, Tilly flitted about the room, reviving its faded glories as far as she was able by deft touches here and there; straightening curtains, patting cushions, and confiding to various unresponsive articles of upholstery the information that her Love was like a Red, Red Rose.

"Tea-table here, I think," she said, pausing. "Probably Lady Adela would have hers nearer the fire; but then Lady Adela's drawing-room carpet has not got a hole in it. Come in!"

The door opened, and an eerie figure appeared. It was Mr. Russell — *né* Stillbottle — in his shirt-sleeves, wearing an insecurely fastened dickey. His black trousers, being much too long

for him, presented a corrugated appearance. In his hand he carried a great bunch of pink carnations.

"These 'ave just been 'anded in, Miss," he announced. "No name, and" — with a slight note of congratulation in his voice — "nothing to pay."

Tilly thanked him, and, taking the flowers, buried her face in the heart of the bunch. When she withdrew it she found that Mr. Stillbottle was still present.

"If you could find him, Miss," he said deferentially, "I should like to 'ave a word with the Chief Nut."

"Who?"

"The old feller that's running this fake."

"Oh, my father?" said Tilly, biting her lip. "He is dressing, I think." She tucked three or four carnations into her belt and began to arrange the others in a bowl.

"Then, perhaps," said Mr. Russell, "you could advise me on a purely personal matter."

"Certainly," replied Tilly absently. Dicky's gift still claimed all her attention.

"It's these trousers, Miss," explained Russell confidentially. "They are the pair supplied by the management; and between ourselves I don't think they suit me. Brother Perce may 'ave a faithful 'eart, but 'e's *built* all wrong. These trous-

ers are six or eight inches too long in the leg. I feel as if I was wearin' a pair of concertinas. Now — "

This sartorial jeremiad was cut short by the entrance of Mrs. Welwyn, who, travelling full-speed astern and towing Amelia and the tea-table of Pumpherston in her wake, butted the double doors open, and backed heavily into the orator. Mr. Russell, looking deeply injured, retired to complete his toilet.

"That's better," said Tilly, when the small tea-table had been placed over the hole in the carpet, and the tea-tray had been placed over a hole in the tablecloth. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes," said Amelia.

"What about the babies?"

"I have washed and dressed them," said Mrs. Welwyn. "'Melia will fetch them down for a few minutes about a quarter-to-six."

"That's all right," said Tilly approvingly. "They are darlings, both of them, and I should like to have them down all the time, but it's too risky. What time is it now?"

"Ten minutes to five," said Amelia.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Mrs. Welwyn, greatly agitated at the proximity of her hour. "Where shall I sit, Tilly dear?"

"On the sofa, Mumsie; and don't get hot, because you are looking very nice," said Tilly soothingly. "Hallo, Dad — just in time!"

Mr. Welwyn in a frock-coat, looking quite the scholar and gentleman, had entered from his bedroom.

"I perceive the feast is spread," he observed jauntily. "Mistress of Ceremonies, how do we dispose ourselves?"

"Mother here," replied meticulous Tilly — "on the sofa with the 'Morning Post.' I picked it up off the floor of the railway-carriage this morning. Don't read it; just be glancing at it carelessly. Father, sit by the fire with a book. Here's one. 'Melia, you had better be on a foot-stool at Mother's feet, with your head against her knee. Don't fall over her when you get up, Mother. And don't come forward more than three steps to meet Lady Adela: you're as good as she is, remember. Say it's very sweet of her to come all this way. And if you call her 'your Ladyship,' I shall walk straight across the room and kill you — see?"

"Yes, lovey," sighed the flustered Mrs. Welwyn. "What *do* I call her?"

"Lady Adela — not Lady Mainwaring, mind!"

"It sounds so familiar, starting Christian names right off," objected Mrs. Welwyn feebly.

"Never mind; you've got to do it," said Tilly ruthlessly. "I shall be here by the tea-table, and if any of you get on to thin ice I shall drop a teaspoon. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, Tilly," replied a respectful chorus.

"Very well, then," replied the Mistress of Ceremonies. "Now let me see you all in your places. Attention!"

Tilly clapped her hands, and her well-drilled retinue froze into their appointed attitudes.

"Don't hold the 'Morning Post' as if you were trying to lick butter off it, Mother," said Tilly. "'Melia, pull up your stocking. Dad, you are splendid, but you are laughing. This is a serious business, remember. Now, all keep like that for two minutes, to see if — Mercy on us, here they are!"

But she was wrong.

The door creaked, and swung slowly open, to admit the attentuated figure of Grandma Banks, who in the most unconcerned fashion possible hobbled across the room to the fireplace and seated herself in the vacant armchair opposite to her son-in-law, with every appearance of having come to anchor for the evening.

. . . . . .

Grandma's descendants gathered into a panic-stricken knot in the corner.

"She *can't* stay!" whispered Tilly frantically. "Mother, get her to bed."

"My dearie," responded Mrs. Welwyn helplessly, "you know what she is when she smells a rat!"

"Try, anyhow!" urged Tilly, glancing feverishly at the clock.

Mrs. Welwyn approached her aged parent much as a small boy approaches a reputed wasp's nest.

"Mother," she said nervously.

"Eh?" replied Mrs. Banks, looking up sharply and scrutinising her daughter over her glasses. "What 'ave you got them things on for? Goin' out somewhere? At your age, too!" she added irrelevantly.

"Yes — no — yes," stammered Martha Welwyn, who tampered with the truth with difficulty. "I've arranged for you to have your tea in your own room this afternoon, Mother."

"Why?" enquired Mrs. Banks at once.

"You are not looking very well," interposed Mr. Welwyn rashly.

"I'm eighty-one," retorted the old lady with great spirit, "and as 'earty as ever I was, Welwyn. I shall 'ave my tea in 'ere."

"We rather want this room this afternoon, dear," resumed Mrs. Welwyn gallantly. "Father has some people coming in on business."

"Is Father going to get a job of work to do?" riposted Grandma Banks, in tones of gratified surprise.

Mr. Welwyn blew his nose sheepishly, and the clock struck five. Tilly came forward and knelt by her grandmother's chair.

"It is very important for all of us, Granny," she pleaded, "that Father should have an undisturbed talk with these people; so we thought we would keep this room clear this afternoon. You don't want to be troubled with strangers, do you? Nasty, loud-voiced people."

"I likes people with loud voices," replied the old lady cantankerously. "I can 'ear what they says."

"But they're only going to talk business," urged Tilly. "Come along, there's a dear old Grandma. You'll be much more comfortable in your own room. There's a nice fire there, and I'll bring you in a lovely tea. Take my arm."

By this time Mrs. Banks had been raised to her feet, and now found herself being gently but inexorably propelled in the direction of the door.

"You don't *want* me, that's the truth," she observed, getting reluctantly under way. "You're ashamed of your old Grandma, that's what it is."

"Nonsense, darling," said Tilly. "You know how fond we all are of you. But you would only be tired out by a lot of people."

"No," persisted the old lady, "you don't want me."

She hobbled through the door on her granddaughter's arm, still speaking the truth.

"Poor old Granny!" Tilly's voice said very

gently. "I promise to make it all up to you some day."

The bedroom door on the other side of the landing was heard to open and shut, and there was momentary silence. Then the front-door bell emitted a majestic peal. The sound thrilled the Welwyns like a tocsin. Tilly darted in.

"Get to your places," she whispered.

The troupe hastily resumed their proper poses, and a tense silence ensued.

Mrs. Welwyn took a deep breath.

"*H*as *H*orace," she enquired in a hoarse and hysterical whisper, "*h*urt *H*erbert? No, but *H*ildebrand —"

"They are in the hall," hissed Amelia.

"They are coming up," said Mr. Welwyn calmly.

Suddenly Tilly's fortitude deserted her.

"I can't bear it!" she wailed, and bolted incontinently through the inner door into her father's room.

"Tilly darling, don't leave us!" was the agonised cry of Mrs. Welwyn and Amelia. . . .

Next moment Mr. Welwyn, finding himself alone in his own drawing-room, rose to his feet and, as rapidly as was compatible with the dignity of a scholar and a gentleman, joined the panic-stricken mob in his bedroom.

Almost simultaneously the door onto the land-

ing was thrown open, and Mr. Stillbottle's wheezy voice announced: —

"Lord Mainwaring, Lady Mainwaring, and party!" Then in a surprised and informal tone: —

"Hallo! Stage clear?"

CHAPTER XXI

UNREHEARSED

Mr. Mainwaring, Lady Adela, and party — the latter comprised Sylvia, Connie Carmyle, and Dicky — came to a standstill in the middle of the vast and empty drawing-room and looked enquiringly about them. Lady Adela, upon whom the labour of climbing the staircase had told heavily, first deleted from her features the stately smile which she had mechanically assumed before crossing the threshold, and then began to sit down upon the piece of furniture which Mr. Stillbottle had recently valued at twelve-and-sixpence.

"I would n't set in that chair, mum, not if I was you," remarked a husky voice in her ear. "The off 'ind leg is a trifle dicky."

Lady Adela, suspended in mid-air like Mahomet's coffin, started violently upwards into a vertical position, and then, having, on the advice of the officious Mr. Stillbottle, selected the sofa, took in the drawing-room with one comprehensive sweep of her lorgnette.

Mr. Stillbottle withdrew, doubtless to con his lines.

"H'm," remarked Lady Adela. "This is evi-

dently not one of the rooms that has just been in the hands of the painters and decorators."

"Dick," enquired Sylvia, who had been superciliously inspecting the mahogany whatnot with the deal back, "who was that furtive Oriental person who slipped past us on the staircase? Not another future relative-in-law, I trust."

"The stout nigger gentleman, you mean?" said Dicky, with unimpaired good humour. "I fancy he must have been calling on Mr. Welwyn about his studies. I have a notion that London University is somewhere about here."

"What a jolly old-fashioned house this is," said Connie from the window-seat. "How nice and shady this big square must be in summer."

"It is a fairly shady locality all the year round, I fancy," observed Sylvia sweetly.

Kind-hearted Mr. Mainwaring coughed, and looked unhappily towards his son. But Dicky did not appear to have heard. He had just discovered his carnations.

Lady Adela took up the tale.

"There was a small but ferocious-looking creature with red whiskers," she announced, "hanging over the banisters on the top floor. Who would he be, now?"

"Don't ask me, Mum," said Dicky. "I've never been in the house before, remember, except downstairs. Probably a paper-hanger, or —"

He was interrupted by the entrance of a stately procession headed by Mrs. Welwyn, the rest following in single file.

Tilly effected the necessary introductions prettily and with perfect composure; and presently the company assorted itself into what we will call Tableau Number One. Mr. Welwyn led Lady Adela back to the seat which she had vacated.

"Most of the furniture in this mansion of ours is Early Victorian," he announced with a ready laugh; "but I think you will find this sofa comfortably Edwardian, Lady Adela."

Lady Adela, favourably impressed with her host's appearance and manner, smiled graciously and once more cautiously lowered herself onto the sofa. Here, in obedience to an almost imperceptible sign from her husband, the quaking Mrs. Welwyn joined her, and announced, in a voice which she entirely failed to recognise as her own, that it was very sweet of them all to come so far.

Amelia ran impulsively to Dicky and kissed him. Mrs. Carmyle, Sylvia, and Tilly fell into a chattering group round the tea-table. Mr. Welwyn and Mr. Mainwaring shook hands warmly and exchanged greetings. The tea-party was launched.

"How many years is it, Welwyn?" asked Mr. Mainwaring.

"Let us not rake up the past, my dear Main-

waring," said Mr. Welwyn. "More years than we care to count — eh? We'll leave it at that. But I am delighted to meet you again. I wonder how the old College prospers. Foster was your tutor, was n't he?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Mainwaring, pleasantly flattered to find that a man who had been two years senior to him should remember so much about him.

"Mine, too," mentioned Mr. Welwyn, as if determined to put his guest at his ease.

"He's a bishop now, I hear," said Mr. Mainwaring.

"*Eheu, fugaces!*" sighed Mr. Welwyn. "Come and sit by the fire."

"I think we had better have tea, Tilly," said Mrs. Welwyn, as per programme.

The Welwyn family, recognising a cue, began to bestir themselves for Tableau Number Two.

"I seem to hear it coming up, Mother," replied Tilly.

She was right. Portentous rattlings and puffings were now audible without. Next moment the doors were bumped open and Mr. Stillbottle appeared, carrying the tea-pot on a tray.

Apparently something was on his mind. His appearance was that of a righteous man deeply wronged. His was the demeanour of a British artisan compelled by forces which he cannot

control to perform a task not included in his contract.

A moment later the situation explained itself. Behind Mr. Stillbottle, clinging affectionately to his flowing coat-tails, marched The Caution and The Cure. They were dressed in white, and looked exactly alike except that The Caution wore abbreviated white knickerbockers and The Cure a little white skirt. Their socks were white, their sashes and chubby legs were a radiant pink, and the angelic countenance of each was wreathed in smiles.

The procession drew up at the tea-table, where its leader proceeded to deposit the tea-pot. For a moment there was a pause in the conversation, while the hearts of the Welwyns stood still. The Twins, uncontrolled, sometimes erred on the side of originality.

"He's the Queen," explained The Cure, indicating the flinching figure of Mr. Stillbottle.

"Yesh; and we're holdin' up of his train," added The Caution.

Next moment Connie Carmyle had captured them both.

"You darlings!" she cried, and carried them off to the window-seat. The situation was saved.

"Little pets!" observed Lady Adela, smiling.

Even Sylvia forgot to pose for a moment. Tea was served amid a hum of cheerful conversation.

The children had evoked the maternal instinct, and all was well.

Only Mr. Stillbottle remained cold.

"You oughter 'ave kep' them locked up somewhere," he announced severely to Tilly; and left the room.

"I don't see your son here, Mrs. Welwyn," said Lady Adela. "We had the pleasure of his company for a few minutes on Saturday."

"He will be here any minute, your — Lady Adela," replied Mrs. Welwyn with a jerk. "He is usually kept in the City till close on five, poor boy."

"That aged retainer of yours seems to be a bit of an autocrat, Tilly," said Dicky, taking Mrs. Carmyle's chair at the tea-table.

"Yes," agreed Tilly, feeling rather miserable at having to talk to Dicky in this strain; "but you know what old servants are. In their eyes we never grow up."

"Has he been with you for long, then?" enquired Sylvia, with a deep appearance of interest.

"How long has Russell been with us, Mother?" said Tilly, noting that Mrs. Welwyn's conversation with Lady Adela was beginning to flag.

"I can't remember, dear. It seems a long time, anyhow," replied Mrs. Welwyn with sincerity. "Ah, here is Percy. Come in, my boy. Just in time to hand round the cakes!"

"You can trust little Perce," observed that engaging youth, entirely at his ease, "to be on the spot at the right moment. How de do, Lady Adela? I hope this finds you as it leaves me."

He shook the very limp hand of Lady Adela, and having bestowed an ingratiating smile upon Sylvia, proceeded amid a slowly intensifying silence to offer a humorous greeting to Mr. Mainwaring. Finally he turned to Dicky, and slapped him boisterously upon the shoulder.

"Well, my brave Ricardo," he enquired, "how goes it?"

"Percy, dear old thing," responded Dicky promptly, with his most vacant laugh, "how splendid to see you again! Come and tell me all about your club run on Sunday."

He drew the flamboyant cyclist to a place of safety, and Tilly breathed again.

"There is sugar and cream in this cup, Lady Adela," said Amelia, with a neat bob-curtsey.

"Thank you, little girl," said Lady Adela, taking the cup and smiling indulgently. ("Like a Duchess out slumming," Amelia told Tilly afterwards.) "What pretty manners!" she continued, turning to Mrs. Welwyn. "Where do you send her to school? I used to find it so difficult —"

"She has left school," replied Mrs. Welwyn. "I suppose we ought to send her somewhere to get

finished later on, but there — we can't do without her, and that's the truth. Can we, dear?"

Martha Welwyn put an arm round her little daughter. She was talking with greater freedom and confidence now, with her aspirates under perfect control.

"I can quite understand *that*," said Lady Adela affably. "I dare say you find her indispensable."

"I should think so," replied Mrs. Welwyn, lowering her guard. "What with all the staircases, and a basement kitchen, and separate meals —"

Tilly dropped a teaspoon with a clatter on to the tray.

"I'm so sorry, Sylvia," she said. "Did I make you jump?"

"No," responded Sylvia absently. "I was looking at your butler. He seems to have something on his mind."

Mr. Stillbottle, who had entered the room two minutes previously, and had been awaiting an opportunity of gaining the ear of the company, took advantage of the partial silence which now ensued.

"A person has called, sir," he announced to Mr. Welwyn, "for to iron the billiard table."

Mr. Welwyn broke off his conversation with Mr. Mainwaring.

"Thank you," he said in an undertone. "Let him do so by all means."

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Stillbottle, turning to go.

"Tell him," added Percy, highly pleased with the manner in which the little comedy was unfolding itself, "to see if any of the cues want tips."

"Very good," said Mr. Stillbottle, in a voice which plainly asked why Percy should "gag," when he might not.

The door closed once more, and another hurdle was negotiated. The Welwyns heaved little sighs of relief: Russell's was an unnerving presence. But Tilly glanced at the honest, laughing face of the man who loved her, and felt suddenly ashamed.

"Quite a character, that old fellow," said Mr. Welwyn breezily. "Incorrigibly idle; painfully outspoken; a domestic tyrant of the most oppressive type; but honest as the day. I must get some one to put him in a book. Lady Adela, you have nothing to eat."

Mr. Welwyn deftly changed places with his wife, who gratefully engaged in a conversation with Mr. Mainwaring; and the rest of the company performed one of those complicated evolutions which children call a "general post," and which affords persons of mature years but intellectual poverty the inestimable boon of being

able to employ the same topics of conversation several times over. Tableau Number Three was now set.

For a moment Dicky and Tilly found themselves together.

"Tea, old man?" asked Tilly, offering a cup.

"Thanks, little thing," replied Dicky, touching her hand under the saucer.

"Did you send these?" Tilly looked down at her pink carnations.

Dicky nodded, and his gaze became suddenly ecstatic.

"Tilly," he said in tones of exultant pride, "you are looking perfectly beautiful."

"This is a strictly business meeting," smiled Tilly; but her heart bumped foolishly. For a moment nothing seemed to matter save the knowledge that Dicky loved her and she loved Dicky.

The next event of any importance was the discovery that Mrs. Carmyle, engrossed with the twins, had had no tea. There were cries of contrition from the Welwyn family, and Connie was hurried to the tea-table, followed by the desolating howls of her youthful admirers — howls which increased to yells when Mrs. Welwyn announced that it was time for them to return whence they came. However, they were pacified by an offer from their new friend to accompany them part of the way; and after submitting with a sweetness

as adorable as it was unexpected to an embrace from Lady Adela, they left the room clinging to Connie's skirts, having contributed to the programme the one unassailably successful item of the whole afternoon.

Amelia went with them, but returned almost immediately.

"Mrs. Carmyle is telling them a story in the dining-room," she said to her mother. "They are as good as gold with her."

"Dear Constance! She is a fairy godmother to all children," remarked Lady Adela, who was feeling quite remarkably beatific.

"Yes — children of all ages," corroborated Dicky, catching Tilly's eye.

"I declare," cried Mrs. Welwyn suddenly, as this pleasant episode terminated, "I had almost forgotten. Tilly dear, you had better take your grandmother's tea in to her."

"All right, Mother," assented Tilly blithely. The party was shaping into a success.

"I am so sorry, Lady Adela," said Mr. Welwyn, picking up the new topic with the readiness of a practised conversationalist, "that you will not meet my wife's mother this afternoon. She spends a good deal of her time with us. A dear old lady — quite of the Early Victorian school."

"She is not unwell, I hope," said Lady Adela politely.

"A slight chill — a mere nothing," Mr. Welwyn assured her; "but at that age one has to be careful. The doctor is keeping her in bed to-day. I regret it, because I think you would have enjoyed a conversation with her. She is a mistress of the rounded phrase and polished diction of two generations ago. So unlike the staccato stuff that passes for conversation nowadays."

"Too true, too true!" agreed Lady Adela, eagerly mounting one of her pet hobby-horses. "She sounds most stimulating. It is unfashionable to-day to be elderly. My daughter informs me that no one — not even a grandmother — should have any recollection of anything that happened previous to the period when people wore bustles. All time before that she sums up as the chignon age. No, there is no sense of perspective nowadays. We are all for the present."

"Admirably put, dear Lady Adela," cooed Mr. Welwyn. "I remember —"

What Mr. Welwyn remembered will never be known, for at that moment the door opened, slowly but inexorably, and Grandma Banks appeared. She advanced into the room with a few uncertain and tottering steps, peered round her, and nodded her head with great vigour.

"I thought so," she observed triumphantly. "Company! No wonder I were sent to bed."

There was a paralysed silence. Mr. Welwyn

was the first to recover his presence of mind. He advanced upon his infirm but irrepressible relative shaking a playful finger.

"This is very, very naughty," he announced reproachfully. "What will the doctor say?"

"Eh?" enquired Grandma.

"You were told to stay in bed, you know, dear," said Mrs. Welwyn, coming to her husband's assistance.

"I were n't never told no such thing by nobody," replied the old lady explicitly.

Tilly, avoiding Sylvia's eye, decided to make the best of the situation.

"Well, now you *are* here, Granny," she interposed brightly, "you must come and sit snugly by the fire and have some tea. 'Melia, bring that little three-legged table and put it by Granny's chair, and bring a footstool."

The Welwyns, swiftly taking their cue from Tilly, bestirred themselves in fulsome desperation, and in a few minutes Grandma Banks, a trifle flustered by her sudden and most unusual popularity, found herself tucked into her armchair by the assiduous efforts of the entire family.

"This is my grandmother, Mrs. Banks," said Tilly to Mr. Mainwaring, who happened to be sitting nearest.

"I trust, Mrs. Banks," began Mr. Mainwaring with a deferential bow, "that you are not

allowing your sense of hospitality to overtax your strength."

"Eh?" enquired Mrs. Banks, as ever.

"She is rather deaf," explained Tilly in an undertone. "Don't strain your voice by talking to her too long."

"The gentleman," announced Grandma unexpectedly, "shall talk to me as long as he likes."

"Aha, Tilly, old lady! That's one for you," cried the watchful Percy, and the Welwyn family laughed, hurriedly and tumultuously. Grandma's octogenarian heart glowed. Social success had come to her at last. She began to enjoy herself hugely. Tilly cast an anxious glance round her. Grandma's entrance had sensibly lowered the temperature of the tea-party, and worse threatened. Already Lady Adela was exhibiting a tendency to edge towards the fireplace. It was only too plain that she contemplated yet another "cosy chat." Tilly decided to fall back upon the one trustworthy person in the room.

"Granny," she said, taking Dicky by the arm and leading him forward, "I want to introduce Mr. Dick Mainwaring. You have heard of him, have n't you?"

Mrs. Banks surveyed Dicky over her spectacles.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Banks with deliberation,

"I 'ave 'eard of you. You and our Tilly are walking out."

Dicky assented with a happy laugh, and dropped into the only chair in Grandma's vicinity. Tilly breathed again: Lady Adela's further advance was checked. The party settled down once more, and talk broke out afresh.

Grandma Banks, whose conversational flights were not as a rule encouraged by her relatives, availed herself of her present emancipation to embark upon a brief homily to Dicky.

"I tells you this, young man," she said in a hectoring voice, "you've got a treasure in our Tilly. Don't you forget it."

"I made that discovery for myself a long time ago," said Dicky. He smiled up at his treasure, who was sitting upon the arm of his chair.

The treasure's grandmother, having in the mean time been supplied with refreshment by Amelia, took a piece of bread-and-butter and rolled it up into a convenient cylinder.

"Yes," she continued, dipping the end of the cylinder into her tea, "she takes after her mother, does Tilly. She may get some of her looks from her father's side, but when it comes to character, she's a Banks." Her aged voice rose higher. "Always been respectable, 'as the Bankses," she announced shrilly. "Very different from —"

At this point not less than three persons en-

quired of Lady Adela if she would not take another cup of tea; and in the hospitable mêlée which ensued Grandma's further utterances were obscured.

Percy was holding Lady Adela's cup, and Tilly was re-filling it, when the door opened and Mr. Stillbottle made his second entrance. As before, he came to a halt immediately on appearing, and coughed in a distressing fashion without making any attempt to deliver his lines.

"There is that quaint old retainer of yours again, Tilly," said Sylvia.

Tilly turned quickly.

"Well, Russell?" she asked.

Mr. Stillbottle, ignoring her entirely, addressed himself to the master of the house.

"A message has came through on the telephone, sir," he chanted, fixing his eyes upon an imaginary prompt-book on the opposite wall, "askin' for you to be so kind as to attend a meetin' of the Club C'mittee at three o'clock on Toosday next."

"I think I am engaged," replied Mr. Welwyn, with an anxious glance in the direction of his mother-in-law (who was fortunately busily occupied in masticating a cylinder); "but say I will let them know."

"Right," said Mr. Stillbottle, and departed.

The Welwyns, who during the time occupied by their butler's second "turn," had been in-

clining uneasy ears in the direction of the open doorway, surveyed one another in a frightened fashion. All was not well on the second floor: evidence to that effect was plainly audible.

"Great bore, these committee meetings," commented Mr. Welwyn. "I expect you have your fill of them, Mainwaring."

"Alas, yes!" said Mr. Mainwaring. "They are all the same. Everybody sits and looks portentously solemn —"

"All sorts of non-controversial business is brought forward as a matter of pressing importance —"

"Everybody disagrees with everybody else—"

"And ultimately everything is left to the Secretary, who arranges matters quite satisfactorily without any assistance whatsoever!"

The two elderly gentlemen laughed happily at their own spirited little dialogue, and Mr. Welwyn rose to lay down his cup. It was a tactical blunder of capital magnitude. Lady Adela, left momentarily unguarded, immediately slipped her moorings, rose to her feet, and sailed with great stateliness in the direction of the fireplace.

"I am going to have a chat with your dear mother," she observed graciously to Mrs. Welwyn in passing. "Dick dear, let me have your chair."

Dicky, feeling that it was not for him to par-

ticipate in a battle of giants, obeyed, and Lady Adela sank down opposite Grandma Banks. Simultaneously sounds of further disturbances penetrated from the regions above, and a small lump of plaster fell from the ceiling. Grandma, still intent upon a hearty and unwholesome tea, made no acknowledgment of Lady Adela's presence until Mrs. Welwyn effected an introduction.

"Mother," she explained, "this is Lady Adela, Mr. Dick's mother."

Mrs. Banks nodded curtly.

"It is very kind of you, Mrs. Banks," intimated Lady Adela in the voice of one who meditates producing soup-tickets later on, "to make this special effort on our behalf. I hope we are not too much for you."

The relict of the departed Banks poured some tea from her cup into her saucer, took a hearty and sibilant sip, and replied: —

"Very few folks 'as ever bin too much for me. I 'ear as 'ow you have come on business."

"We told her," Mrs. Welwyn explained to Lady Adela, who was watching Grandma's performance with the saucer with hypnotic fascination, "that you and Mr. Mainwaring were coming today to have a talk about Tilly and Mr. Dick. That is what she meant by business, I expect."

But the explanation fell on inattentive ears.

Lady Adela's gaze had now risen from the saucer to the ceiling, which was vibrating madly, apparently under the repeated impact of one or more heavy bodies. The rest of the company had given up all pretence at conversation some time ago.

It was Dicky who supplied a line of explanation.

"Mrs. Welwyn," he said gravely, "your paperhangers seem to be skylarking a little bit — what?"

"That's it," agreed Mrs. Welwyn, transparently grateful. "But what can one do?" she continued, speaking with pathetic solicitude in Lady Adela's direction. "You know what paperhangers are!"

"A playful race! A playful race!" cooed Mr. Welwyn helpfully.

There was another heavy bump overhead. The prism-decked chandelier rattled, and the ceiling shed another regretful flake.

"Sounds as if some one had tried to walk up the wall and failed," observed Percy, with that courageous facetiousness which comes proverbially to Britons at moments of great peril.

"How exasperating it must be for you all, Tilly," said Sylvia sympathetically. "I wonder you don't go and live somewhere else while it is going on."

Tilly, whose powers of endurance were fast

coming to an end, made no reply. Kindly Mr. Mainwaring bridged the gulf of silence.

"It is extraordinary," he began chattily to the company at large, "how completely one is at the mercy of the British workman. Once you get him into your house he sticks. I suppose the title of arch-limpet must be awarded to the plumber; but I should think the paperhanger —"

He was interrupted by the querulous but arresting voice of Grandma Banks.

"What's that?" she enquired with ominous distinctness, "about plumbers?"

"I was awarding the palm for general iniquity, dear Mrs. Banks," explained Mr. Mainwaring smilingly, "to the plumbing fraternity. Plumbers —"

Mrs. Welwyn made a hasty movement, but it was too late. Grandma's bowed and shrivelled form suddenly swelled and stiffened.

"Ho, was you?" she enquired with rising indignation. "Then let me tell you that my late 'usband, Mr. Josiah Banks, what was very 'ighly respected in 'Itchin —"

Tilly dropped two teaspoons despairingly, and there was another and more timely bump overhead.

"Percy dear," interposed Mrs. Welwyn hastily, "don't you think you had better run up and see what those wretches are doing?"

"Righto, Mother," said Percy, rising with alacrity.

"My late 'usband —" resumed Mrs. Banks, *crescendo.*

"It certainly is an extraordinary noise," remarked Mr. Welwyn loudly. "They appear to be on the staircase now."

"Sliding down the banisters, no doubt," said Dicky. "Playful little fellows! Shall I come with you, Percy?"

Percy Welwyn paused, a little embarrassed.

"Don't trouble," he said. "You see —"

He paused again — fatally.

"My late 'usband," proclaimed Grandma Banks on the top note of her register, "was a plumber 'imself."

Next moment the double doors burst open, and Mr. Mehta Ram, frantic with terror, hurled himself into the room.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REAL TILLY

Mr. Mehta Ram promptly fell at the feet of Mr. Welwyn, and attempted, in true Old Testament fashion, to embrace that embarrassed scholar and gentleman by the knees.

"Keep him out!" he shrieked. "Great snakes, I implore you! Lock the door!"

In the absence of the snakes this office was performed by Percy and Dicky. Directly afterwards there was a rush of feet down the staircase, and a fusilade of blows began to rain upon the panels.

"Open the door!" commanded a voice, in a frenzied Paisley accent. "I'm wanting in! Tae break his neck," it added in explanation.

Dicky and Percy promptly put their backs against the door. Mrs. Welwyn crossed hastily to her husband's side.

"It's that Pumpherston," she announced in a low voice. "What are we to do?"

Mr. Welwyn addressed the suppliant at his feet.

"Come, Mr. Mehta Ram," he said, "don't be frightened. He can't get in. What is the trouble?"

Mr. Mehta Ram lifted his face from Mr. Welwyn's boots and addressed the company at large.

"Mr. Welwyn, Mrs. Welwyn, and general public," he began — the latter designation was apparently intended for the Mainwaring family, who, with the exception of Dicky, had ranged themselves into a compact group on the further side of the room — "I appeal to you as British subject — as a member of that great Empire upon which the sun never sits —"

"Sets, old comrade!" corrected Dicky from the door.

"Shed your tears!" commanded Mr. Ram, disregarding the interruption. "Give us a look in! I am in jeopardy — in a damtight place! My adversary knocks upon the door — the avenging Pumpherston! He arraigns me of petty larceny. He accuses me that I have confiscated his table. But I am innocent! I make my defence! I throw myself — Ah-a-a-a-a-h! Help!"

The other door — that leading into Mr. Welwyn's bedroom, which itself communicated with the landing outside — burst open, and a small, red-whiskered, and intensely ferocious gentleman bounded in. It was the avenging Pumpherston.

Mr. Ram bolted across the room like an obese rabbit, and took refuge behind the hostile but protective form of Lady Adela.

The avenger paused, obviously nonplussed by the size of the assembly.

"I beg your paurdon," he said awkwardly. "I wis not aware —"

He turned, to find Percy and Dicky standing beside him, one at each shoulder.

"We were half expecting you, Mr. Pumpherston," said Dicky, with a friendly smile. "But if you and this gentleman are playing hide-and-seek, the den is upstairs."

"I beg your paurdon," repeated Mr. Pumpherston, whose bellicosity was fast evaporating, "but yon fat heathen has robbed me. He has lifted a piece of furniture — Heh! Let me get at him!"

With a convulsive bound he wrenched himself free from his interlocutors and made a dash for the door. But he was too late. Mr. Mehta Ram, keeping under the lee of Lady Adela and the furniture, had made use of the brief respite afforded by the recital of his assailant's grievances to effect an unostentatious departure, and was now halfway up the staircase again. The baffled Pumpherston followed him with a long-drawn howl.

"Come on, Percy!" said Dicky.

The pair raced out in pursuit, banging the door behind them. Presently from abovestairs came the sound of renewed conflict; a few

dull thuds and muffled crashes; and then — silence.

. . . . . .

Lady Adela rose to her feet in awful majesty, and addressed the stunned and demoralised remnants of the tea-party.

"Is this a private asylum," she enquired in trumpet tones, "or is it not?"

Grandma Banks was the only member of her audience who replied.

"My late 'usband," she whimpered — "my late 'usband, Mr. Josiah Banks! Greatly respected in 'Itchin — greatly respec—"

Tears coursed slowly down her furrowed cheeks.

In a moment Tilly was kneeling beside her, with her arms round the frail old body, whispering gently and caressingly into her ear. There was a long silence, and Sylvia began to pull on her gloves.

"I think we had better be going," said Lady Adela.

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Welwyn helplessly.

But Lucius Welwyn made a last effort. All seemed lost, yet his inherent polish and *savoir faire* rebelled against such an inglorious and ignominious end as this.

"I must apologise most sincerely for this *contretemps*, Lady Adela," he said with a ready

smile. "Those fellows are two disciples of mine. Law students — British Museum — and so on. They come here periodically to receive instruction from me in my library upstairs" — Lady Adela looked up and regarded him steadily, but he continued with perfect coolness — "but I fear that on this occasion racial animosity has proved stronger than academic unity of purpose. You will understand, I am sure."

"Perfectly," replied Lady Adela. "Come, Sylvia."

Sylvia was quite ready, but at this moment the door flew open once more, and Dicky and Percy reappeared, flushed, panting, but triumphant.

"It's all right, Mrs. Welwyn," announced Dicky reassuringly. "The brunette gentleman has bolted himself into the bathroom, and we have locked up the blonde in a broom-cupboard. Hallo, Mum — going?"

"Yes. Come, Sylvia."

"Certainly, Mother," said Sylvia.

Dicky's ear caught the danger-note in his sister's voice. He stood transfixed, with dismay written across his frank but heated features.

"I say," he stammered. "Mum — Sylvia — what does all this mean?"

"Good-bye, Mrs. Welwyn," said Lady Adela calmly. "Thank you for — ah — entertaining us. I suppose one can get a cab here?"

She shook Mrs. Welwyn's nerveless hand and turned to Mr. Mainwaring, who stood awkwardly smoothing his hat.

"Are you ready, Abel?" she enquired.

Suddenly Tilly Welwyn rose from her knees by her grandmother's side, and, to employ a dramatic expression, took the centre of the stage. She stood face to face with her departing guests, her head thrown back and her hands clenched — a very slim, very upright, very dignified little figure.

"Sit down, please, everybody, if you will be so kind," she said quietly. "I shan't keep you long."

Lady Adela, looking like a boa-constrictor which has been challenged to mortal combat by a small and inexperienced chicken, stood stock-still, with her head oscillating from side to side in a slightly uncertain fashion. Then, recovering herself, she fell back in good order upon her supporters.

The Welwyns, closing loyally upon their small champion, spoke in anxious undertones.

"Don't chuck up the sponge, Sis," whispered Percy encouragingly. "We'll pull you through."

"Don't lose your head, my child," counselled her father. "You may make things worse."

"Tilly, dearie, can you ever forgive me?" was all Mrs. Welwyn said. She forgot, in her selfless

grief for the destruction of her daughter's castle-in-the-air, that she herself had predicted its fall.

Little 'Melia said nothing, but passionately squeezed her sister's hand.

"You are all dears," said Tilly in a clear voice, "and I love you for the way you have stood by me to-day; but I want to speak to the others just now."

She took a step forward towards the Mainwarings, who were grouped beside the tea-table. But before she could speak, Dicky, who had been hovering silently on the outer wing of his own party, crossed the floor and joined her.

"I'll come and stand over here, Tilly," he said, "if you don't mind. There's a nasty draught in that corner."

Tilly smiled faintly.

"I would rather you did n't," she said, with the suspicion of a tremor in her voice. "Please go over there."

Dicky responded by standing-at-ease, military fashion.

"Carry on," he said briefly.

"Please, Dicky!" urged Tilly, "It only makes it harder for me."

Dicky glanced at her white face, and retired one pace backward.

"That is my limit," he said.

Meanwhile Lady Adela had come to the con-

clusion that all this was very emotional and undignified.

"Miss Welwyn," she enquired, "what does this mean?"

"I will tell you," said Tilly. "But first of all I must say one thing. I did not try to trap your son, as you seem to think. We fell — we came to care for one another quite naturally. I made no attempt to catch him. I knew nothing whatever about him. It — it just happened." She turned wistfully to Dicky. "Did n't it?" she asked.

Dicky nodded his head gravely.

"It just happened," he said.

"And since we cared for one another — or thought we did" — continued Tilly with a little choke, "it never came into my head that anything else could matter. But last Saturday, when I went to stay at your house, and saw your grand ways and your grand servants, and all the commotion you made about Members of Parliament, and county families, and all that — well, I began to see rocks ahead. I felt common. My courage began to fail. I began to be afraid that you would not take kindly to the Family —"

"It was n't you that was afraid, dearie," said a respectful voice behind her. "It was the Family."

"I saw, too, Lady Adela," continued Tilly, "that *you* were against me — dead against me — and that as soon as you got hold of a decent-

excuse I should be bundled out of your son's life, like — like an entanglement. That put my back up. I had meant to be perfectly straight and unpretentious with you, but when I saw what you were after, I determined to fight. So I have deceived you."

"We all have," murmured a loyal chorus.

"You have been *done!*" proclaimed Tilly defiantly. She was fast losing control of herself. She felt dimly that she was behaving in an hysterical and theatrical manner; but when one's world is tumbling about one's ears, one may be excused for stating the truth rather more explicitly than is usual. "Yes — *done!*" she repeated. "I will tell you just exactly who we are and what we are. Father is a gentleman, right enough" — her voice rang out proudly — "as well-born a gentleman as any of the land; but he has followed no regular profession for twenty years, and he lives on Mother. Mother keeps lodgings. This house is a lodging-house, and those two men you saw were lodgers. Percy works in a wholesale haberdasher's in Holborn. I do a little dress-designing. 'Melia helps Mother with the lodgers. So you see you have been imposed on: we work for a living! But you must n't blame the Family for what has happened. It was *my* idea from start to finish: the Family only backed me up. And they *did* back me up! No girl ever had such a splendid

father or mother, or brother or sister." Tilly stepped back into the heart of her bodyguard, feeling for friendly hands. "I'm proud of them," she cried passionately, "proud to belong to them! I'm proud that my name is Tilly Welwyn, and I never wish to change it for any other. We Welwyns may be nobodies but we stick together. There! You may go now."

The drawing-room door creaked and opened, but no one noticed.

"I have told you everything, I think," said Tilly, more calmly. "I know now that I should have told you in any case. That's all. . . . No, it's not."

She swung round towards the doorway, and pointed to the grotesque figure of that earnest student of the drama, Samuel Stillbottle, who was myopically deciphering a small but tattered document, all but concealed in the palm of his hand.

"We're paupers!" she cried. "We're in debt! We're broke! There's a distraint on the furniture; and that creature"— Mr. Stillbottle, hazily conscious that a cue was coming, furtively thrust his manuscript into his waistcoat pocket —"that creature is a broker's man! Oh, Mother, Mother, Mother!"

In an instant Martha Welwyn's arms closed round her daughter.

"There, there!" she crooned. "My lamb, my pretty, my precious, my dearie — don't you cry!"

There was a deathlike stillness, broken only by Tilly's sobs. The Mainwarings stood like statues. Mr. Welwyn sat on the sofa, his head bowed between his hands. Grandma Banks slumbered peacefully. The bewildered but conscientious Stillbottle seized his opportunity, and cleared his throat.

"The shover, sir," he announced huskily, "is below, a-waitin' for —"

Next moment a hand like a vice closed upon the herald's collar, and Dicky Mainwaring's voice remarked concisely into his ear: —

"Go to the devil."

Mr. Stillbottle, utterly dazed, raised his head and surveyed the company. Then he smiled apologetically.

"Wrong entrance," he observed. "My error! *Exit hastily!*"

He turned, and shuffled out.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE REAL MR. WELWYN

"*There is an evenin' paper —*"

quavered Mr. Stillbottle blithely, with his feet upon the kitchen hob, —

— "*which is published in the mornin'!*
Twinkle, twinkle, twinkle, little Star!"

He unfolded the early edition of the organ in question and devoted himself to a laboured perusal of the list of probable starters for the Lincolnshire Handicap, now looming in the immediate future; for he was anxious to ascertain whether his premonitions as to the identity of the winner coincided with those of the prophet retained by the management. Apparently they did; for presently the paper was laid aside with a contented sigh, and the student of form resumed the hoary lay which anxiety connected with the investment of his newly acquired capital had caused him momentarily to abandon.

"*Twinkle,* Star!
Tiddley Wink!
Twinkle on till you dunno where you are!
Oh, we'll make things warm for 'Arcourt,
If 'e ever comes down our court!
Twinkle, twinkle, twinkle, little St—"

Conscious of a draught upon the back of his neck, the vocalist turned uneasily in the direction of the door. It had opened some six inches, revealing to view a pair of cherubic heads, set one above the other. Each head was furnished with a pair of quite circular blue eyes, which surveyed Mr. Stillbottle, with unwinking and unnerving ecstasy.

"The Funny Man!" proclaimed The Cure joyously.

"Yesh," agreed The Caution. "Lesh box him."

The pair entered the room hand in hand, and advanced grimly to the attack.

Mr. Stillbottle hastily removed his feet from the hob.

"You two," he announced, "can get on out of this. I ain't never done you no 'arm, 'ave I?" he added appealingly; "so why —"

At this point The Caution dealt him a playful but disabling blow in the waistcoat. The Cure, with a shriek of rapture, seized Mr. Stillbottle's frayed coat by the tails and whirled its owner round three times upon his axis.

"Now catch me!" she shrieked.

"If I *do* —" gasped Mr. Stillbottle, clutching dizzily at the mantelpiece. Further words failed him, and entrenching himself behind a table, he waited like a hunted animal for the further assaults of his enemies.

He was not kept long in suspense. Having armed themselves with the fire-irons, the two affectionate but boisterous infants were upon the point of inaugurating a game of what they called "beat-the-carpet" — it is hardly necessary to specify the rôle assigned to Mr. Stillbottle — when the door opened, revealing the welcome figure of Dicky Mainwaring.

Straightway weapons were thrown down, and the newcomer found himself the centre of a cloud of embraces. Dicky was a prime favourite with children and dogs — no bad test of character, either.

Presently, having shaken himself free from the unmaidenly caresses of the youngest Miss Welwyn, Dicky became aware of the pathetic presence of Mr. Stillbottle.

"Good-morning, Mr. Russell," he said. "You are just the man I want to see."

"You can see me as often and as long as you like, sir," replied the afflicted Russell fervently, "if only you'll put those two imps on the other side of that door."

"Certainly," said Dicky. "Now you two, skedaddle!"

To the amazement and admiration of their late victim the two freebooters departed immediately, merely pausing to receive a valedictory salute from their evictor. Dicky closed the door

upon them, and motioning the broker's man to a chair, enquired: —

"Where is everybody this morning, Mr. Russell?"

"My name, in mufti, to my friends," replied the grateful Russell, "is Stillbottle. But you was asking about 'everybody.' Meanin' the Barcelona Troupe of Performing Nuts?"

Dicky nodded.

"Upstairs, most of 'em," said Stillbottle. "All but your little bit. She 'as gone out."

Dicky looked up sharply.

"For long?" he asked.

"I could n't say," replied the broker's man. "Perce has gone to the City. Mother and the little 'un are a-makin' of the beds. The Principal Filbert is still between the sheets. I'm the only member of the cast visible at present. But as you say it's me you came to see, perhaps you'll kindly state your business.

Dicky did so.

A quarter of an hour later he ascended to the drawing-room, restored to its usual aspect of dingy propriety after yesterday's junketings. He noticed that his carnations had disappeared.

Mr. Welwyn was just entering from his bedroom. At the sight of Dicky he started, but recovering himself with his usual readiness, shook hands.

"Good-morning, Mr. Mainwaring," he said. "Be seated."

Dicky complied. "You seem surprised to see me, sir," he said.

"Frankly," replied Mr. Welwyn, "I am. After our treatment of you yesterday I hardly expected you to return. I can only extenuate our performance by assuring you that what looked like a carefully graduated series of insults was nothing more than the logical, if unforeseen, development of a somewhat childish attempt upon our part to delude your family into the impression that our circumstances were not so straitened as, in point of fact, they are. We meant well, but — "

Mr. Welwyn concluded this explanation with a rather helpless gesture. It was an awkward and difficult moment. With all his faults he was a man of feeling, with a gentleman's inherent distaste for anything savouring of sharp practice; and he knew that the boy before him felt the situation as acutely as himself. There are few sadder sights than that of an old man eating humble pie to a young man.

But Dicky, The Freak, was equal to the occasion. He answered gravely: —

"The point of view which I prefer to take, Mr. Welwyn, is this — that you were all trying to do a good turn to Tilly."

"Thank you, Dick," said Mr. Welwyn simply.

"Still, there was a second reason which I thought might perhaps keep you away."

"What was that?"

"Well — the presence in one's abode of a sheriff's officer is apt to exercise a dispersive influence upon one's calling acquaintance."

"On this occasion, however," replied Dicky serenely, "you will find that a calling acquaintance has dispersed the sheriff's officer."

Mr. Welwyn, who had been perambulating the room, stopped dead.

"You don't mean to tell me," he exclaimed, "that the fellow is gone?"

Dicky nodded. "Five minutes ago," he said.

"But — I don't understand," muttered the elder man. "Did you *kick* him out? If so, the fat is in the fire with a —"

"He left this behind him," interposed Dicky awkwardly. "Under the circumstances — I took the liberty."

Mr. Welwyn gazed long and silently at the stamped document which lay beneath his eyes. Then he looked up at Dicky and made a movement as if to shake hands; then drew back and bowed, not without dignity.

"Mr. Mainwaring," he said, "I thank you. I will leave it at that. If I possessed a less intimate knowledge of my own character, I should hasten to give utterance to the sentiment which at this

moment dominates my mind — namely, a sincere determination never to rest until I have repaid you this sum. But I have not arrived at my present estate without learning that any such impulse on my part would be entirely transitory. From the age of five I can never recollect having formed a single resolution that I was able to keep. I therefore accept your very generous aid without protest or false pride. My wife, of course, would not approve. She comes of a class whose sole criterion of respectability is a laborious solvency during life and an expensive funeral after death. Do not imagine that I am belittling her. She is the one sound investment I ever made. I need not trouble you with the facts of our courtship and marriage; but I will tell you this, my boy, that if a man had real cause to be grateful for and proud of his wife, that man is Lucius Welwyn. And the extraordinary part of it all is that she is proud of me — *me!* Instead of acting like a sensible woman and deploring me as a commercial and domestic liability, she persists in exalting me into a social asset of the first water. I do not attempt to dispel these illusions of hers. In a woman's hands an illusion, after she has fashioned it to the shape that pleases her, hardens into a solid, enduring, and comforting fact. Perhaps, then, things are best as they are. But I cherish no illusions about myself. I know my

limits. I am a considerate husband and an affectionate father. My temper, except at times of the severest domestic stringency, is irreproachable; and I find myself generally regarded as good company by my friends. But I am not a worldly success. I take life too easily, perhaps. I allow others to step over my head. I am too ready to stand by and watch the passing show, rather than plunge in and take my part."

The speaker paused, and for a moment his glance rested upon the honest, rather puzzled, but deeply interested eyes of the young man upon the sofa. Suddenly an exposition of candour came upon Mr. Welwyn.

"There was a time," he said in a less buoyant tone, "when these propensities of mine used to distress me. The day I was deprived of my Fellowship, for instance—"

His voice shook suddenly.

"Don't tell me about it, sir, if you would rather not," said Dicky quietly.

"For drunkenness, Mr. Mainwaring — for drunkenness!" burst out Mr. Welwyn. "Not for chronic, sordid soaking — that has never been a foible of mine — but for characteristic inability to do things in their right order. Take warning by me, Dick, and never put the cart before the horse. I had been invited to lecture to a very learned body upon a very special occasion. A suc-

cessful appearance would have gained me my F. R. S. The natural and proper course for me to pursue was to deliver the lecture first and treat myself to a magnum of champagne afterwards. What I actually did was to treat myself to the magnum of champagne and then deliver the lecture. I may say with all modesty that that lecture caused a profound sensation. It is still quoted — but not in textbooks; and it ended my University career. My life since has been a series of similar incidents — disaster arising from my inherent inability to distinguish between the time to be merry and the time to sing psalms. Still, I keep on smiling. Fortune has not touched me for many years now. Fortune likes fresh blood: once you get used to her she leaves you alone. You see the manner of man I now am — a seasoned philosopher — a man who takes life as it comes — a man who never meets trouble halfway — a man unburdened by the sentimental craving, so prevalent in this hysterical age, to confer unsolicited benefits upon his fellows — a man unhampered at the same time by narrow scruples about accepting, in the spirit in which it is offered, the occasional assistance of his friends. In short, a sane, dispassionate, evenly balanced man of the world, insured against sudden upheaval by a sense of proportion, and against depression of spirits by a sense of humour."

Mr. Welwyn paused again, and there was another silence, punctuated by the rattle of traffic outside. Presently he continued, in yet another mood: —

"Sometimes my point of view changes. I look at myself, and what do I see? An elderly, shabby-genteel inhabitant of Bloomsbury, with not a single memory of the past to fall back on, save that of a youth utterly wasted — a youth hung about with golden opportunities, each and all successively disregarded from a fatuous, childish belief that the supply was inexhaustible — and with nothing to look forward to but a further period of dependence upon a wife who is as much my moral superior as she is my social inferior. An earner of casual guineas — a picker-up of stray newspapers — the recipient of refreshment respectfully proffered by unintellectual but infinitely more worthy associates in bar parlours. A loafer — a waster — a *failure!* That, Mr. Mainwaring, is the father of the girl whom you desire to marry. . . . I am not what you would call religious, but sometimes the impulse comes upon me — and I obey it forthwith — to go down upon my knees and thank God from the bottom of my heart that my children take after their mother."

The broken scholar dropped wearily into his chair.

"Youth! Youth! Youth! Youth!" he murmured. "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth!"

His head slipped down between his hands.

Dicky, curiously stirred, attempted to say some word, but nothing came.

Suddenly Mr. Welwyn sprang to his feet. The cloud had lifted, or else pride had come to the rescue. It is often difficult to tell which.

"Dick," he said, "I perceive from your attitude that you are about to be sympathetic. Don't! Sympathy is wasted on me. In five minutes from now this mood will have passed. In half an hour I shall be as happy as an ostrich with its head in the sand. That has been my lifelong posture, and a very comfortable posture, too, once you get used to it! It is only when one comes up to breathe that things hurt a bit. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go out. I have had a letter this morning offering me some exceedingly welcome and possibly permanent work. I do not know where Tilly is, but she should be in presently. I do not ask what your business with her may be. I have no right — and no need."

The two men shook hands.

"Good-bye, dear Dick," said Mr. Welwyn, "and thank you for the very unobtrusive manner in which you have helped a lame dog over a stile."

Next moment the door closed, and he was gone.

"We are queer mixtures," mused philosophic Dicky. . . . "I wonder where Tilly is!"

. . . . . .

Five minutes later the drawing-room door opened again, this time to admit little 'Melia. She paused and drew back, at the spectacle of her late ally sprawling at ease before the scanty fire.

"Hallo, 'Melia!" said Dicky cheerfully.

"Hallo!" replied Amelia cautiously. "Have you come to — see mother?"

"Not to-day, thank you," said Dicky. He regarded the little girl curiously. "I say, 'Melia, have I offended you in any way?"

"You? Me? No!" replied Amelia, in wide-eyed surprise. "Why?"

Dicky smiled coyly.

"There used to be a pleasant little form of greeting," he intimated.

"You still want to?" cried 'Melia in a flutter.

"Please."

Next moment Miss Amelia Welwyn, feeling that the bottom had not dropped out of the universe after all, was giving Mr. Richard Mainwaring a kiss.

"Where is Tilly this morning?" asked Dicky carelessly.

"Gone out," said Amelia — "to look for a job. She gave up the other one when she got — engaged."

"I see," said Dicky, nodding his head.

"I suppose you have come to break it off," continued the experienced Amelia. "They all said last night you were bound to do it, after what had happened."

"That sort of thing," explained Dicky, "is done for one by one's parents, I believe. I am rather young, you see," he added apologetically.

He rose, gently displacing his small admirer from his knee.

"Now I must be off," he said. "Give this to Tilly for me, will you?"

Amelia was still twisting and turning the letter in her hands when the bang of the front door signalled Dicky's departure.

"If his parents are going to break it off for him," said Amelia to herself in a puzzled whisper, "what does *he* want to go writing to her for?"

CHAPTER XXIV

A GARDEN PLOT IN RUSSELL SQUARE

Outside, leaning contentedly against the railings of the garden opposite to the *Maison* Welwyn, and enjoying the spring sunshine, Dicky encountered the Carmyles.

"Hallo, you two!" he said. "What are you doing here? Liable to get run in for loitering, hanging about like this."

"We have followed you, Dicky," began Connie rapidly, "to tell you that your mother is coming up to town, and —"

"Mother — already?"

Connie nodded.

"Fourth speed in," confirmed Mr. Carmyle. "Live axle — direct drive — open exhaust."

"Trailing your father behind her," added Connie. "I understand you had an interview with them this morning."

The Freak gave a wry smile.

"I did," he said. "It was rather a heated interview, I'm afraid. Words passed. But we can't stand here dodging taxis. Come into the garden, Maud!"

"Don't we require a key?" enquired the re-

christened Connie, surveying the iron railings which enclosed the Bloomsbury Eden.

"I have one," said Dicky. "It belongs to the Welwyns. Tilly and I used to use it a good deal," he explained, in a subdued voice.

He led the way into the dingy but romantic pleasance which had sheltered himself and his beloved, and the trio sat down upon a damp seat. Mrs. Carmyle, looking rather like one of the sparrows which hopped inquisitively about her daintily shod feet, established herself between her two large companions. Her husband, who was a creature of homely instincts, hung his silk hat upon an adjacent bough with a sigh of content, and began to fill a large briar pipe. Dicky, a prey to melancholy, kicked the grass with his heels.

"Where is Tilly this morning?" asked Connie.

"Gone out — to look for a job!" replied Dicky through his clenched teeth. "Just as if a snug home and the life of a lady were things she had never dreamed of!" His eyes blazed. "Great Heavens, Connie — the *pluck* of the child! What a brute it makes me feel!"

Connie patted his hand maternally, but said nothing. There was nothing to say. Presently Dicky continued, in a more even voice: —

"So my mother is coming up this morning — to strike while the iron is hot — eh?"

"'To make a direct appeal to Miss Welwyn's better nature,' was what she *said*," replied Mrs. Carmyle cautiously.

"I am afraid there will be a bit of a scrap," said Dicky thoughtfully. "My dear mother's normal attitude towards her fellow-creatures is that of a righteous person compelled to travel third-class with a first-class ticket; but when she goes on the warpath into the bargain — well, that is where I take cover."

"She'll roll the Welwyns out flat," observed Mr. Carmyle, with that conviction which only painful experience can instill.

"She won't roll Tilly out flat," said Dicky.

"Nor Mrs. Welwyn either," added Connie; "so kindly refrain from putting in your oar, Bill! We are n't all terrified of Lady Adela. *Cowardy, cowardy, cus*— "

Mr. Carmyle, flushing with shame, abruptly invited his small oppressor to switch off; and Dicky proceeded to review the situation.

"I don't think my dear parent will get much change out of any of the Welwyns," he said. "They are a fairly competent lot. Moreover, they have burned their boats and have nothing to lose; so I expect there will be some very pretty work. My lady mother is an undoubted champion in her class, I admit, but she has got a bit out of condition lately. Managing Dad and harrying

the County are n't really sufficient to keep a woman of her fighting-weight up to the mark. Still, I don't particularly want her big guns let loose on Tilly."

"Tilly has gone out for the day, I suppose?" said Connie.

"So I was told. But how did you guess?"

Connie Carmyle flapped her small hands despairingly.

"Oh, what creatures!" she cried, apparently apostrophising the male sex in general. "Can't you understand anything or anybody — not even the girl you love? Of course, she is out for the day; and if you go there to-morrow she will be out for the day, too!"

"Why?" asked Dicky blankly.

"Yes — why?" echoed that sympathetic but obtuse Philistine, Bill Carmyle.

His wife turned upon him like lightning.

"Bill," she said, "keep perfectly quiet, or I shall send you off to meet Lady Adela's train at Waterloo! I want to talk to Dicky. Now, Dicky, listen to me. That little girl" — Connie's eyes grew suddenly tender, for she loved her sex — "cares for you, old man — quite a lot. Quite enough, in fact, to draw back if she thinks she is going to stand in your way during life. That pathetic little fraud of a tea-party yesterday has set her thinking. She has suddenly realised that

although she might *get* you by false pretences, she could not *keep* you by false pretences — nor want to. She has also realised that her Family are impossible. That means that she will have to give up either you or the Family. And you are the one she will give up, Dicky. She loves you too much to pull you down to their level. She won't give that as her reason — women are built like that — but she will give you up, all the same."

The usually placid Dicky had grown excessively agitated during this homily.

"Connie," he burst out, "for goodness' sake don't try to frighten me like that! Tilly's Family are not impossible. They're only a bit improbable. And besides, talking of impossible families, look at mine! Do you know who my grandfather was? He was a Lancashire cotton operative — a hand in a mill. He invented something — a shuttle, or a bobbin, or something of that kind — and made a fortune out of it. He ultimately died worth a hundred thousand pounds; but to the end of his days he dined without his coat, and, if he could possibly escape detection, without his collar either. I never saw him, but my Dad says he was a dear old chap, and I can quite believe it. As a father-in-law he was a sore trial to my poor mother, whose ancestors had worn their collars at meals for quite a considerable period; but the hundred thousand overcame her susceptibilities

in the end, and she and Dad have lived happily ever since."

Dicky rose restlessly to his feet, and continued his address standing.

"Now I think," he said, "that we can set my grandfather, cotton operative, against the late lamented Banks, plumber and gas-fitter. Banks, of course, was the bigger man socially — you know how plumbers get asked simply *everywhere* — but Mainwaring's son married the daughter of an Earl; so we will call them quits. Anyway, Tilly is quite as good as I am — miles better, in fact."

"Dear Dicky!" murmured Connie approvingly. Here was a lover of the right metal.

"What about friend Perce?" enquired a gruff voice.

It was a telling question. If Dicky could clothe such an uncompromising fact as Percy Welwyn in a garment of romance, he was capable of making a success of any marriage. Mr. Carmyle waited grimly for his answer.

"Ah — Percy!" replied Dicky thoughtfully. "Yes, Tiny, old soul, that's a sound question. Well, Percy is n't exactly polished — in fact, one might almost be forgiven for describing him as a holy terror —"

"He wants losing," said Carmyle with conviction.

"But listen," pursued Dicky. "Percy may be all we say, but he cheerfully hands over half his weekly screw, which is n't a fabulous one, to the common fund of the Family. It is not every young man who would do that, especially such a social success as Percy. Oh, yes, Connie, he *is* a social success; so don't look incredulous. I tell you he is a regular Apollo at shilling hops. He took me to one a few weeks ago."

"Where?" asked Connie.

"Somewhere near Kennington Oval. The girls simply swarmed over him. But he is not in the least stuck up about it; and — well, he is kind to Tilly. I am, therefore," concluded Dicky stoutly, "an upholder of Percy."

Mr. Carmyle, encouraged by the silence of his wife, felt emboldened to continue his cross-examination.

"What about mother-in-law?" he queried.

It was a foolish question.

"She is a woman in a thousand," said Dicky promptly, and Mrs. Carmyle, with a withering side-glance at her unfortunate lord, nodded her head vigorously in affirmation.

"Mrs. Welwyn is not what we call a lady," proceeded Dicky, "but she is the right stuff all through. I admit that she has not been quite successful in her efforts to polish Percy, but look at the others! The little sister, 'Melia, is a dear.

The twins are rippers. Old Welwyn — well, he's a rotter, but he's a gentlemanly rotter; which pretty well describes the majority of my friends, now I come to think of it. And he is no hypocrite: he is quite frank about his weaknesses. Now, to sum up. On her father's side Tilly is a lady; on her mother's side she is a brick. That's a pretty good combination. Anyhow, it's good enough for me; and if she'll have me I'm going to marry her."

Dicky concluded the unburdening of his soul with a shout and a wave of his hat, and all the sparrows flew away.

"Now," said Connie, patting the seat in a soothing fashion, "sit down and tell me how you are going to do it."

Dicky resumed his place beside her and said meekly: —

"I'm looking to you to tell me that, Connie."

Apparently he had made the remark that was expected of him, for Connie immediately assumed a little air of profound wisdom, and her unregenerate husband emitted an unseemly gurgle.

"Your first difficulty, of course," she said to Dicky, ignoring her wretched and ill-controlled spouse, "will be to see Tilly. After the humiliation of yesterday her only instinct will be to hide herself. She will be not-at-home to you every time you call; and of course, it is n't fair that you

should hang about in the hopes of catching her outside."

"No," agreed Dicky. "Not the game."

"You have written to her, I suppose?" said Connie.

"Yes. Left a note this morning," replied Dicky, brightening up.

"Well, of course, that is no use. It will make her happier, poor little soul, but it won't change her decision. Letters never do. You've simply *got* to *see* her, Dicky! Bill, run away for a minute, there's a dear. Go and think about a cantilever, or something, over there."

Mr. Carmyle, puffing smoke, obediently withdrew to the other side of a clump of sooty rhododendrons. Connie turned eagerly to Dicky. Her face was flushed and eager, like a child's.

"Dicky," she whispered earnestly, "*see* her! *See* her! See her alone! Take her in your arms and tell her that you will never, never, never let her go! She will struggle and try to break away; but hold on. Hold on tight! Go on telling her that you love her and will never leave her. When she sees that you mean it, she will give in. I know. I'm a woman, and I know!" Connie squeezed Dicky's arm violently. "I *know!*" she repeated. . . . "You can come back now, Bill dear."

"Nice goings-on, I don't think," observed Mr.

Carmyle severely, reappearing round the rhododendron. "Shouting all over the garden — what?"

But the two conspirators, still in the clouds together, took no notice of him. Instead, Connie rose to her feet and began to walk towards the nearest gate. The two men followed.

"Connie, how am I going to do it?" asked Dicky deferentially.

"I have a plan," replied Connie, with portentous solemnity. She was launched on an enterprise after her own heart. "Listen! Have you a portmanteau?"

"Yes, at my rooms."

"Well, go there and pack it."

"Why?" asked Dicky in a dazed voice.

Mrs. Carmyle replied by quoting a famous and oracular phrase which had lately fallen from the lips of a prominent statesman, and the party reached the railings.

"Hallo, there's a taxi at the Welwyns' door," said Carmyle. "I wonder — oh, Lord!"

He fell hastily to the rear, his knees knocking together. Two figures were ascending the steps of the house. One was majestic and purposeful; the other small and reluctant. The front door opened and closed upon them.

"My mother — already!" exclaimed Dicky in dismay.

That burned child, William Carmyle, broke into a gentle perspiration.

"Never mind," said Connie reassuringly. "She was bound to come. She can't do any harm."

"Supposing she gets Tilly to agree never to see me again?" said Dicky feverishly. "Supposing she insults her with money?" He ground his teeth, and Carmyle groaned sympathetically.

Connie patted his arm soothingly.

"The last word is the only thing that matters in this case," she said with great confidence; "and *you* are going to have that, Dicky, my friend. Now, run away and pack your portmanteau. Then come and lunch with us at Prince's. I must fly. I have an appointment with a gentleman at Russell Square Tube Station at twelve-thirty. It is after that now."

Dicky glanced at Bill Carmyle for an explanation of this mysterious assignation, but that gentleman merely shook his head in a bewildered fashion.

"Don't ask me, old man," he said.

"Who is the gentleman, Connie?" Dicky enquired.

"An admirer of mine," replied Mrs. Carmyle, with a gratified smile. "I met him in the train this morning."

"For the first time?"

"No — second. When I saw him I had an idea,

so we arranged to meet again at twelve-thirty. He has another engagement, but he said it did n't matter when I asked him. After he has done what I want, he is coming to lunch, too. Now run and pack. Au revoir!"

Revelling in every turn of the highly complicated plot which she was weaving, little Mrs. Carmyle, followed by her inarticulate but inflated husband, pattered swiftly away round the corner — and incidentally out of this narrative — turning to wave a reassuring hand to her client before disappearing.

The Freak, puzzled but confident, went home to pack his portmanteau.

CHAPTER XXV

PURELY COMMERCIAL

I

"Well," said Mrs. Welwyn, taking off her apron, "the beds are done, anyway. One less to make," she added philosophically, "now that Pumpherston has hopped it. That's something."

"We could do with the rent of his room for all that, Mother," commented practical Amelia.

"That's true, dearie," sighed Mrs. Welwyn. "Well, perhaps we shall get another lodger. Where's your father, by the way?"

"He went out half an hour ago. I expect he's at the Museum."

"Did Mr. Dick see him?"

"I don't know."

"And Mr. Dick said he did n't want to see me?" Mrs. Welwyn spoke rather wistfully.

"That was what he said," admitted 'Melia in a respectful tone.

"I don't suppose he's very anxious to see any of us much," said Mrs. Welwyn candidly. "We must just get the idea out of our heads, that's all. Forget it! Then, there's that broker's insect. We are going to get *him* paid off double-quick, or I 'm a Dutchman. I don't know how

it's going to be done. Still, we have got round worse corners than this, have n't we, duckie?"

"Yes, Mother," said Amelia bravely.

Martha Welwyn suddenly flung her arms round her little daughter.

"My precious," she whispered impulsively, "I would n't mind if it was n't for you children." Her voice broke. "God pity women!"

"Mother, Mother!" cried little 'Melia reprovingly. "That's not like you!" And she hugged her tearful but contrite parent back to cheerfulness again.

A door banged downstairs, and the two fell apart guiltily.

"That's Tilly," said Mrs. Welwyn. "We must n't be downhearted, or she'll scold us. Bustle about!"

With great vigour and presence of mind this excellent woman snatched the cloth off the table and shook it severely. Amelia, having hastily removed a tear from her mother's cheek with a duster, opened the piano and began to wipe down the keys, to the accompaniment of an inharmonious chromatic scale.

The door flew open and Tilly marched in, humming a cheerful air.

"Such luck, Mother!" she cried.

For a moment Martha Welwyn was deceived. She whirled round excitedly.

"What do you mean, dearie?" she exclaimed.

"I've got a berth — with Madame Amélie — old Mrs. Crump, you know — in Earl's Court Road. One of her girls is leaving —"

"Got the sack?" enquired Mrs. Welwyn, rearranging the tablecloth.

"No. She's only" — Tilly's voice quavered ever so slightly — "going to be married. I've got her place, and I'm once more an independent lady."

"That's capital news, Tilly," said Mrs. Welwyn heartily. At any rate, her daughter would have something to occupy her mind.

"Now the next thing to do," proceeded Tilly with great animation, "is to get rid of the broker's man. We ought to be able to raise the money all right. I'm at work again. Dad has had an offer of newspaper articles; and if only we can get Mr. Pumpherston's room let —"

"The broker's man has gone, Sis," said Amelia.

"Gone?" cried Tilly and Mrs. Welwyn in a breath.

"Well, gone out, anyhow. I saw him shuffling across the Square half an hour ago."

"My lord will find the chain up when he comes back," said Mrs. Welwyn grimly.

"Still, we must find the money," persisted Tilly. "We have never been in debt yet, and we are never going to be." Her slight figure stiffened

proudly. "Independence! That's the only thing worth having in this world. Be independent! Owe nothing to nobody!"

Certainly, whether she derived it from her father's ancestry or her mother's solid worth, Tilly Welwyn was composed of good fibre. With flushed cheeks and unnaturally bright eyes she turned to the mirror over the drawing-room mantelpiece and began to take off her hat.

"It's a mystery to me," ruminated the puzzled Mrs. Welwyn, "why that creature went out. He must have known we would n't let him in again."

"Perhaps Dicky kicked him out," suggested that small hero-worshipper, Amelia, with relish.

Tilly turned sharply.

"Who?" she asked. A hatpin tinkled into the fender.

Little 'Melia bit her lip, and turned scarlet.

"Mr. Dick, dearie," said Mrs. Welwyn, coming to the rescue. "He looked in this morning."

"What for?" asked Tilly, groping for the hatpin.

"I don't know. I did n't see him," admitted her mother reluctantly.

"I do," said 'Melia, having decided to get things over at once. "He left a letter for you, Sis."

Tilly rose to her feet again, keeping her back to her audience.

"Where is it?" she enquired unsteadily.

"Here," said Amelia, with a hand in the pocket of her pinafore.

"Put it on the table," said Tilly, standing on tiptoe while she patted her brown hair into position before the glass. "I'll read it presently."

"There's the front-door bell!" said Mrs. Welwyn nervously. "What are we to do if it's Russell again?"

"Lock the door," said Amelia promptly.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Mrs. Welwyn doubtfully. "I wonder what the law is. I wish Daddy was in." She considered, perplexed. "Anyhow, I'll go down and see. Come with me, 'Melia," she added tactfully.

The pair slipped out of the room and went downstairs, leaving Tilly alone with her letter.

"Supposing he rushes in the moment we open the door?" whispered Amelia, as they consulted on the mat. "What then?"

"We'll put the chain up first, and then open the door a crack," said Mrs. Welwyn.

This procedure was adopted, with the result that Mr. Mainwaring and Lady Adela, waiting patiently upon the steps outside, were eventually confronted, after certain mysterious clankings had taken place within, with a vision of two apprehensive countenances, one childish and the other middle-aged, set one upon another against

a black background in a frame eight feet high and three inches wide. It was but a glimpse, for the vision was hardly embodied when it faded from view with uncanny suddenness: and after a further fantasia upon the chain, the door was tugged open, to reveal the shrinking figures of Mrs. Welwyn and Amelia.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Welwyn," said Lady Adela. "I hope you will forgive this early call, but we are anxious to have a talk with — er — Miss Welwyn."

Miss Welwyn's agitated parent ushered the visitors into the dining-room, bidding Amelia run upstairs and give warning of the coming interview. Resistance did not occur to her.

Amelia found her sister sitting motionless on the edge of a chair, with her arms upon the table. In her hands she held an open letter, which she was not reading. Her grey eyes, wide open, unblinking, were fixed on vacancy. Her lips moved, as if repeating some formula.

Amelia touched her softly on the arm.

"Tilly," she whispered, "they want to see you."

Tilly roused herself.

"Who?" she asked dreamily.

The question was answered by the appearance in the doorway of Lady Adela, followed by her husband. Tilly rose, thrust the letter into her belt, and greeted her visitors.

"How do you do?" she said mechanically. "Won't you sit down?"

Lady Adela, singling out that well-tried friend of yesterday, the sofa, sank down upon it. Mr. Mainwaring remained standing behind. Little 'Melia, after one sympathetic glance in the direction of her sister, gently closed the door and joined her mother on the landing outside.

"'Melia," announced that harassed châtelaine, "there's the front door again! It must be Stillbottle this time. Supposing he meets *them?*"

"It don't signify if he does," replied her shrewd little daughter. "They have met once already. Still, we may as well keep him out."

Mother and daughter accordingly proceeded to a repetition of their previous performance with the door-chain. As before, the front door was ultimately flung open with abject expressions of regret.

On the steps stood a small, sturdy, spectacled young clergyman.

"Oh, good-morning," he exclaimed. "I am so sorry to trouble you, but I have been asked by a friend to look at your vacant room. Might I do it now?"

This was familiar ground, and Mrs. Welwyn escorted the stranger upstairs with a sigh of relief.

"My friend proposes to move in almost imme-

diately," explained Mr. Rylands, mounting at a distressingly rapid pace, "if they are satisfactory. That is — of course" — he added in a panic — "I am sure they will be satisfactory. But my friend proposes to move in at once."

His approval of the late lair of the bellicose Pumpherston when — almost before — the panting Mrs. Welwyn had pulled up the blind and unveiled its glories, erred on the side of the ecstatic. The terms asked for the dingy but speckless apartment were not excessive, and Mr. Rylands agreed to them at once.

"May I ask, sir," enquired Mrs. Welwyn, as they descended the staircase —"did some one recommend us? We like to know who our friends are."

Mr. Rylands was quite prepared for this question.

"As a matter of fact," he explained volubly, "I believe the gentleman saw the card in the window; and being particularly fond of Russell Square, and — and its associations, and so on, he decided to come and reside here. He will send his luggage round this afternoon."

By this time they had passed the closed drawing-room door and were in the hall again.

"Will you give me the gentleman's name, sir, please?" asked Mrs. Welwyn, in obedience to a reminding gleam in the eye of her small daughter,

who was standing full in the open doorway, apparently with the intention of collaring Mr. Rylands low. "I suppose he can give a reference, or pay a week in advance? That's our usual —"

"Certainly, by all means," said Rylands hurriedly. Like most men, he found it almost as delicate and embarrassing an undertaking to discuss money matters with a woman as to make love to her. "In point of fact," he continued, searching furtively in his pocket, "my friend would like to pay a month in advance. He is anxious to make quite sure of the rooms, so — oh, I beg your pardon!" (This to little 'Melia, into whom he had cannoned heavily in a misguided but characteristic attempt to walk out of the house backwards.) "*Good*-morning!"

And the Reverend Godfrey Rylands, thrusting a warm bank-note into Mrs. Welwyn's palm, stumbled down the steps into the Square, and set off at a most unclerical pace in the direction of Piccadilly. He was going to lunch, it will be remembered, with Connie Carmyle.

"He never left the new lodger's name," recollected Mrs. Welwyn, too late.

"No, but he left a five-pound note," said practical Amelia.

II

Meanwhile, upstairs, Lady Adela was concluding a stately and well-balanced harangue. Of her two auditors Mr. Mainwaring appeared to be paying more attention. He looked supremely unhappy.

Tilly sat bolt upright on a hard chair, staring straight through Lady Adela at the opposite wall. Occasionally her hand stole to her belt. It is regrettable to have to add, in the interests of strict veracity, that the greater part of Lady Adela's carefully reasoned and studiously moderate address was flowing in at one ear and out at the other. Tilly had no clear idea that she was being spoken to; she was only vaguely conscious that any one was speaking at all. All her thoughts were concentrated on the last page of Dicky's letter — all she had read so far. She sat quite still, occasionally nodding intelligently to put her visitors at their ease. Once or twice her lips moved, as if repeating some formula.

"Do not imagine, Miss Welwyn," Lady Adela was saying, "that we are in any way angry or resentful at what has occurred. We are merely *grieved*, but at the same time *relieved*. So far from wishing you ill in consequence of this attempt upon your part to — to better yourself, my husband and I are here to offer to do something for

you. You must not think that we want to be unkind or harsh. This is a difficult and painful interview for both of us —"

"For all of us, Miss Welwyn," murmured Mr. Mainwaring.

"You appreciate that fact, I hope, Miss Welwyn," said Lady Adela in a slightly louder tone; for the girl made no sign.

Tilly nodded her head absently.

"He loves me! He loves me!" she murmured to herself. "He loves me still!"

Lady Adela ploughed on. She was a kindly woman, and in her heart she felt sorry for Tilly. Not that this fact assisted her to understand Tilly's point of view, or to remember what Dicky had never forgotten, namely, that the girl before her was a lady. She laboured, too, under a grievous disadvantage. Deep feeling was to her a thing unknown. She had never thrilled with tremulous rapture. The sighing of a wounded spirit had no meaning for her. Her heart was a well-regulated and rhythmatic organ, and had always beaten in accordance with the laws of what its owner called common sense. It had never fluttered or stood still.

Lady Adela had married her husband because he was rich and she was the youngest daughter of a great but impoverished house; and after the singular but ineradicable habit of her sex, she

had founded her entire conception of life upon her own experience of it. To her, marriage was a matter neither of romance nor affinity. It was a contract: a sacred contract, perhaps, — in her own case it had even been fully choral, — but a mere matter of business for all that. To her, her son's ideal bride was a well-bred young woman with the same tastes and social circle as himself, and possibly a little money of her own. It had never occurred to her that Love contained any other elements. Accordingly she ploughed on; trying to be fair; quite prepared to be generous. She offered to "advance" Tilly in life. She talked vaguely of setting her up "in a little business." She remarked several times that she was anxious to do the right thing, adding as in duty bound that certain conditions would be attached to any arrangement which might be made, "the nature of which you can probably imagine for yourself, my dear." She begged Tilly to think things over, and assured her that no reasonable request would be refused. Altogether Lady Adela's was a very conciliatory and well-balanced proposition. Had it been made by an encroaching railway company to a landed proprietor in compensation for compulsory ejection from his property, or by a repentant motorist to an irate henwife, it might fairly have been regarded as a model of justice and equity. As a scheme for snatching an amiable

but weak-minded young man from the clutches of a designing harpy, it erred if anything on the side of generosity. But as a tactful attempt to convey to a young girl the information that she could never marry the man she loved, it was a piece of gross brutality. But Lady Adela did not know this.

Fortunately Tilly heard little or nothing. Occasionally a stray sentence focused itself on her mind. "My husband and I communicated our views to our son this morning," was one. "Impart our decision *ourselves* . . . avoid the necessity of a painful interview . . . unnecessary correspondence," and the like — the disconnected phrases fell upon her ears; but throughout it all the girl sat with her head in the clouds, fingering her letter and hugging her secret. Once Lady Adela, in a flight of oratory, half-rose from her seat. Tilly, with a vague hope that the call was over, put out a hand, which was ignored.

But the interview came to an end at last; and Lady Adela, conscious of a difficult task adequately and tactfully performed, but secretly troubled by Tilly's continuous apathy, rose to her feet. Tilly mechanically stood up, too.

"Good-morning, Miss Welwyn," said Lady Adela, offering her hand. "We have to thank you for a patient hearing."

Tilly smiled politely, shook hands, but said

nothing. Mr. Mainwaring, his heart sore for the girl, timidly signalled to his wife to leave her in peace.

"Do not trouble to show us out," said Lady Adela; and departed imposingly through the door.

With a long sigh of relief Tilly dropped back into her seat. Suddenly she was aware that she was not yet alone. Mr. Mainwaring had lingered in the room. He came forward now, and took the girl's hand in both of his.

"My dear, my dear!" he said quickly. "I wish you were my daughter. God give you a good husband!"

There was an ominous cough upon the landing outside; and the old gentleman, recalled to a sense of duty, trotted obediently out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Tilly snatched the letter from her belt.

"He loves me!" she murmured. "He loves me! He loves me still!"

She was not referring to Mr. Mainwaring senior.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FINAL FREAK

TILLY finished writing her letter, signed and addressed it, and leaned back in her chair.

She had just declined to marry Dicky Mainwaring.

"That's done, anyhow," she said to herself, with the instinctive cheerfulness of those who are born plucky. "Now I'll go out and post it before the Family come home, and then perhaps a little walk round Bloomsbury will give me an appetite for tea." But as Tilly rose briskly to her feet her eye fell upon the letter from Dicky, lying beside the answer to it which she had just written. For the tenth time she picked it up and re-read certain passages.

I don't think I ever loved you as I did yesterday afternoon. As I watched you fighting that brave, uphill battle of yours in the face of the most awful odds — Mother and Sylvia are awfully odd, you know — I suddenly realised how utterly and entirely I had become part of you — or you of me, if you like. I was on your side in that plucky, preposterous, transparent little conspiracy from start to finish, and when the crash came I think I was harder hit than anybody. The only complaint I

have to make is that you did not take me into your confidence. I could have put you up to one or two tips which might have made all the difference — you see, I have known Mother and Sylvia longer than you have — and we could have enjoyed the fruits of victory together. Still, I forgive you for your obstinacy in trying to put the enterprise through single-handed. It was very characteristic of you, and anything that is characteristic of you is naturally extra precious to me. So don't imagine that yesterday's little interparental unpleasantness is going to make any difference to you and me — to You and Me!

"To You — and Me!" echoed Tilly softly.

. . . You will probably receive a call from my esteemed parents. They mean well, but I mistrust their judgment. They will probably intimate that we must never see one another again, or something of that kind. I am afraid it is just possible that my dear old mother will offer you compensation, of a sort. If she does, try to forgive her. She does not understand. Not at present, that is. One day she will laugh at herself — which will establish a record — and apologise to you for having entertained the idea.

"No, she won't!" observed Tilly at this point.

. . . It seems ridiculous, does n't it, that any one should seriously set out to appeal to you to "abandon your demands" upon me? As if things were not entirely the other way. It is I who am making de-

mands upon you, dearest. The idea! To lecture you as if you were some designing little adventuress, instead of the most wonderful worker of miracles that ever lived — the girl who made bricks without straw — the girl who made a man of Dicky Mainwaring!

. . . So do not be afraid with any amazement — do you know where that quotation comes from? — at anything my mother may say. She will probably pile on the agony a bit about the various kinds of trouble that await a couple who marry out of different social circles, and punk of that kind. She is a dear thing, my old mother, but very feminine. When she wants to argue about anything she always begins by begging the question. Besides, our love is big enough to square any circle, social or otherwise. So don't you worry, little girl. Leave things to me, and —

Tilly read more slowly and yet more slowly, and then stopped reading altogether. Then she rose slowly to her feet, crossed the room, and stood gazing into the fire. She did not know what begging the question meant, but she had other food for reflection. Connie Carmyle was right. When it comes to a pinch, letters are useless things, and being useless are, more often than not, dangerous.

On the mantelpiece stood two framed photographs — one of Tilly, the other of Dicky. The original of the first addressed the second.

"I wish you had n't put in that last bit, Dicky dear . . . '*Abandon my demands*' . . . '*A little adventuress.*' . . . That's what I am, when all is said and done. A little adventuress, trying to better herself! Lady Adela is right and we were wrong. What else could you think of me, Dicky, once you married me and found me out — a silly, hysterical, common little chit? . . . There's your letter, dear. I dare say I could have got quite a lot for it in a court of law; but some adventuresses are n't up to sample. They have no spirit."

Dicky's much-read epistle dropped into the flames, and Tilly turned with sudden briskness from her lover's photograph to her own.

"As for you, Tilly Welwyn," she observed severely, "just remember that you are only an ordinary, hard-working, matter-of-fact little London work-girl. You can put all fancy notions about fairy princes and happy-ever-after out of your head. You are getting a big girl now, you know. You must live your life and go your own way; and sometimes — only sometimes, mind! — when you are feeling downhearted and up against it, I'll allow you to let your thoughts go back to the best man that ever walked; and although you may cry a bit, you will thank God you did not spoil his life by marrying him."

The doors leading onto the landing creaked, and Amelia peeped cautiously in. Tilly started

guiltily. None of us like to be caught talking to ourselves. The habit savours of exclusiveness — and other things.

"Tilly dear," said little 'Melia listlessly, "the new lodger has come with his luggage. Could you give him a hand with it? Everybody is out, and it's rather heavy for me."

"All right," said Tilly readily. "I'll be down in half a minute."

Amelia disappeared, leaving the doors open; and Tilly hastily assumed a business-like yet hospitable expression, suitable for the welcoming of a second-floor.

"One thing more, though, my girl," she remarked sternly, releasing her features for a moment in order to address her own reflection in the overmantle mirror. "Just remember that this will require a real *effort*. It's all very well to feel heroic just now, and talk about giving him up, and living your own life, and so on; but it won't be easy. You will have to put your back into it. Supposing you meet him in the street one day? What then? Can you walk past him? You know you are as weak as water where he is concerned. What are you going to do about it?"

Tilly met her own eyes in the glass, and looked very determined. The eyes in the glass responded by filling with tears. Tilly turned away impatiently from this disloyal exhibition.

"Very well, then," she said. "If you are as weak as that about it, you must just make up your mind to *avoid* him — that's all. There's nothing else for it. You must never see him again. . . . And I love him so!" she added inconsequently. . . . "Poor Tilly!"

Little 'Melia appeared in the doorway again.

"He's bringing up his portmanteau," she announced breathlessly, and vanished.

Tilly turned towards the door. Laborious steps were audible upon the staircase, as of one ascending with a heavy load. Presently a man in a great-coat passed the open doorway. On his left shoulder he carried a large portmanteau, which hid his face. He passed up the second-floor staircase and out of sight.

Tilly, hot and cold by turns, stood shaking in the middle of the floor.

There was a bump overhead. Then steps descending, slowly. He was coming back.

Tilly shut her eyes tight for a full half-minute; then opened them and tottered forward with a cry.

In the doorway — laughing, joyous, open-armed — stood The Freak.

"You foolish, foolish Tilly!" he said; and caught her as she fell.

THE END

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